



## STOCKCERO TEACHING KIT (160)

TEXT: *Cuentos de La Habana Elegante*

AUTHOR: various

EDITOR: Jorge Camacho, Rocío Zalba & Hugo Medrano.

### 1. Overview for Instructors

*Cuentos de La Habana Elegante* brings back into circulation the first short-story collection ever published in Cuba (1887), originally issued by the literary magazine *La Habana Elegante*. Nineteen authors contributed one narrative each, including:

- Cirilo Villaverde (author of *Cecilia Valdés*).
- Ramón Meza, Justo de Lara, Enrique Hernández Miyares, Aniceto Valdivia, Antonio Zambrana, and others.

The volume is foundational for the history of the Cuban short story and offers a remarkably rich window into:

- The literary field in Havana between the Ten Years' War (1868–78) and the 1895 war of independence.
- The transition from late Romanticism to early modernismo in Cuba.
- Social and political tensions around colonial rule, honor, dueling culture, slavery, and emerging national consciousness.

The introduction by Jorge Camacho and the included notes:

- Situate the authors and texts within the wider transatlantic context (Cuba–Spain–Europe).
- Explore the role of *La Habana Elegante* as a key modernista periodical.
- Highlight how these stories anticipate later developments in Cuban narrative.

This edition preserves the original texts (with modernized spelling and corrected misprints), includes the original prologue, catalog of Cuban books, and brief author notes, making it particularly suitable for teaching.

### 2. Why This Text Works in the Classroom

#### **Primary document for Cuban literary history**

Gives students direct access to how short fiction was being imagined and practiced in 1880s Havana.

#### **Multiple authors, multiple genres**

The volume includes realistic tales, moral anecdotes, “viejos cuentos”, artist stories, proto-modernista pieces, and narratives with strong political undercurrents.

#### **Bridge between Romanticism and modernismo**

Ideal for showing how late-nineteenth-century prose shifts toward sensual description, aestheticism, and interiority.

#### **Political and social content**

Duels, the legacy of slavery, colonial censorship, and memories of war allow rich discussions on nation, honor, and violence.

#### **Compact stories for close reading**

Many texts are short enough to assign in full; others can be excerpted for targeted analysis.

#### **Suggested course contexts:**



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- Nineteenth-Century Latin American Literature
- Cuban Culture and History (19th century)
- The Emergence of the Short Story in Latin America
- Romanticism to Modernismo in Hispanic Narrative
- Literature and the Press / Periodical Culture in Latin America

### 3. Suggested Reading Sequences

#### A. *The Cuban short story as a new genre*

- **Core materials:**

Introductory essay «Los cuentos de La Habana Elegante» (Jorge Camacho)  
Original prologue «Al lector»  
One or two short stories of your choice

- **Focus:**

Why is this 1887 volume considered the first Cuban short-story book?  
How do the editors frame the project in «Al lector»?  
What expectations of “literature amena” and “literatura dinámica y moderna” emerge?

- **Possible assignment:**

Have students map out the table of contents and identify genres, themes, and author professions (journalists, novelists, etc.). Discuss what this says about the late nineteenth-century literary field.

#### B. *Modernista aesthetics and the “new sensitivity”*

- **Core text:**

«La estrella verde» (Julio Rosas)

- **Optional pairings:**

Select passages from Valdivia’s story («Un cuento de Francisca» / Valdivia’s narrative on poetic initiation).  
Descriptions highlighted by Camacho as proto-modernista.

- **Discussion angles:**

- Identify modernista features:
  - – Sensual, color-saturated description (jewels, fabrics, light).
  - – Focus on artists/poets and inner life over social plot.
  - – Use of myth, legend, European settings (e.g., a legend in the Rhine with indigenous/Black figures).
- How does «La estrella verde» shift attention away from what “happens” toward how it is described?
- Connect to modernismo in poetry (Darío, Casal, Martí’s comments on “versos joyantes”).

#### C. *Honor, dueling, and the culture of violence*

- **Core texts:**

A “duel” or honor-related story such as «Cuento viejo» (Justo de Lara / José de Armas y Cárdenas).



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Passages discussed in the introduction regarding Aniceto Valdivia and literary polemics.

- **Angles:**

How is the duel represented—as sport, as necessity, as absurdity?

What does the recurrence of duels among writers suggest about public prestige, masculinity, and the lack of institutional trust?

Situate this culture within the aftermath of the Ten Years' War and the proximity of renewed armed struggle.

- **Extension:**

Briefly compare with other Latin American or European texts where duels or affairs of honor are central.

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#### **D. Race, slavery's legacy, and voice mediation**

- **Core texts:**

«Un cuento de Francisca» (Aurelia Castillo de González)

Any references to slavery or recently freed people in other stories.

- **Teaching ideas:**

Aurelia Castillo “lets Francisca speak” while still mediating her voice:

– How is Francisca represented (language, perspective, knowledge)?

– In what ways does the narrative imitate her speech patterns?

Connect to the broader tradition of white editors/writers mediating Black voices in Cuban literature (Suárez y Romero, Lydia Cabrera, Carpentier, Barnet, etc.).

- **Questions:**

What are the possibilities and limits of this kind of “ventriloquized” testimony?

How does the 1886 abolition decree in Cuba shape the way this story is told and received?

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#### **E. Gender, sexuality, and the “mujer fatal”**

- **Core texts:**

«Por una, otra» (Bernardo Costales y Sotolongo)

«Cuento griego» (Antonio Zambrana)

- **Focus:**

Representations of female sexuality as threat, temptation, or inspiration.

Zambrana's reworking of the Pigmalión and Galatea myth:

– Relationship between art and desire.

– How sculpted beauty stands in for “the woman”.

- **Discussion:**

How do these texts echo contemporary medical, moral, and journalistic discourses on prostitution, “desenfreno del vicio”, and women's roles?

Where do we see moralizing vs. more complex, aestheticized treatments?

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#### 4. Sample Discussion Questions

##### **Magazine, nation, and genre**

How does the fact that these stories come from *La Habana Elegante*—a literary magazine—shape their themes and style?

– What is the relationship between periodical culture and the emergence of the short story?

##### **Modernismo and politics**

Camacho suggests it is misleading to say that *La Habana Elegante* avoided politics.

– Where do you see political concerns (independence, colonial rule, slavery, honor culture) surfacing in the stories, even when “aesthetics” seems primary?

Literary polemics and transatlantic tensions

In Valdivia’s anecdote about Clarín (and Camacho’s commentary):

– What does this episode tell us about the position of Latin American writers vis-à-vis

##### **Spanish criticism?**

– How does conflict (polemics, insults, duels) participate in constructing a new literary movement?

##### **Narrative voice and reliability**

Choose one story and analyze who narrates and from what position (first-person witness, omniscient, framed anecdote, etc.).

– How does this affect our access to social reality vs. literary self-consciousness?

##### **Canon formation and forgetting**

Some authors in this volume are now canonical (Villaverde, Zambrana), while others are almost completely forgotten.

– Based on the introduction and the stories you read, what factors might explain these different trajectories?

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#### 5. Short Written Assignments

##### **Close reading (2–3 pages)**

Select a descriptive passage from «La estrella verde» or another aesthetically dense story.

Analyze the imagery (color, light, materials, references to art or myth).

Explain how the passage exemplifies early modernista prose.

Reflect briefly on how this style reshapes what a “story” is supposed to do.

##### **Contextual essay (4–5 pages)**

Using Camacho’s introduction and 1–2 stories, write an essay on one of the following:

The role of *La Habana Elegante* in the development of Cuban modernismo.

Representations of honor and dueling as symptoms of a broader crisis of colonial society.

The mediation of Black or popular voices by elite writers.

##### **Archival / periodical exercise (for advanced seminars)**

Ask students to research (even via digital surrogates) another 19th-century periodical (Cuban or Latin American) and compare its literary content and editorial discourse to *La Habana Elegante*. Short written report or in-class presentation.

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#### 6. Assessment Ideas

Reading logs focused on:

– Appearance of explicitly political references (wars, colonial administration, Spain, etc.).



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- Moments where aesthetic description seems to overshadow plot.
- Recurring motifs (duels, artists, statues, exotic settings).

**Group presentations**

Each group takes one story and presents:

- Author bio sketch (based on Camacho’s notes).
- Genre and main theme.
- How the story reflects either modernista aesthetics, political tensions, or both.

**Exam question prompts**

- “Discuss the ways in which *Cuentos de La Habana Elegante* anticipates twentieth-century Cuban narrative, both thematically and stylistically.”
- “Analyze how one of the stories negotiates the relationship between art and politics in a colonial context.”

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**Explore the “Short Fiction for the Hispanic Literature Classroom” Collection:**

This volume is part of our curated short-fiction series designed for university courses in Hispanic literature, women’s writing, and the fantastic, alongside titles such as *El viejo, el asesino, yo, y otros cuentos* (Ena Lucía Portela), *Feiguele y Otras Mujeres* (Cecilia Absatz), *Cuentos de La Habana Elegante* (Ramón Meza et al.), *Cuentos de Muerte y de Sangre* (Ricardo Güiraldes), and *Tradiciones Peruanas (las más cortas)* (Ricardo Palma).

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