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The Spanish American Erotic Short Story

Colonial Times

Being a fundamental part of life, sexuality and eroticism have been present in Spanish American society and literature since its beginnings. The clash between pre-Hispanic cosmogonies and the medieval-renaissance minds of European conquerors and priests results in a steady flow of short anecdotes transmitted both orally and through the written word. Often, the anecdotes with an erotic element speak about unfulfilled loves and transgressions, going against the norms of social institutions and Catholic dogma. *El Carnero* (1636-38), by a Creole son of a conquistador, Juan Rodríguez Freyle (1566-1640), illustrates the presence of the erotic during these times. Several pieces in the book, extracted from a wastebasket found at Bogotá's court of appeals, relate marriage infidelities and offer a critique of the corruption in colonial society. This work has been called a "kind of Spanish colonial *Decameron*" (see González Echevarría 1997, p. 50). It must be noted, however, that what critics describe as the literary short story had not been born yet. Both the royal decree in 1577 forbidding the publication of fictional works in Spanish America, and the preeminence of other genres (epic and lyric poetry), account for the lack of a literary vehicle for tales during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The Nineteenth Century

The independence of Spanish America from colonial rule brings forth the process of nation building. The novel and the essay are the preferred genres for literary expression. During these times, as Enrique Pupo-Walker explains, the short story is not yet fully defined and moves "slowly amid the many hybrid forms employed by nineteenth-century writers of fiction" (1996, p. 514). Between 1830 and 1880, stories bare the imprint of the romantic aesthetic, based on a sentimental sensibility, idealized characters and local customs and traditions. Erotic content is

sprinkled minimally in the *Tradiciones*, by Peruvian Ricardo Palma (1833-1919), the most important short story writer of this period. “Secret Love,” by Mexican Manuel Payno (1810-1894), however, is a good example of the representation of eroticism in the short story in this time frame. The protagonist describes his passion for Carolina as “ardent, pure, and holy” (Menton 1991, p. 38), in a tale about undeclared love, implicit promiscuity and love to the grave (literally).

Between 1880 and 1910, Realism, Naturalism, and *Modernismo* —the first literary movement to have arisen from Spanish America— coexist with different agendas: the observation of both urban and rural reality (Realism), with a clinical eye on the predicament of marginalized populations (Naturalism) versus the aesthetics of “art for art’s sake” of *Modernismo* that renovated literary language and form. Given the social criticism of most realist and naturalist fiction, the erotic is frequently found in short stories dealing with violent emotions. In “The Well,” by Chilean Baldomero Lillo (1867-1923), a romantic triangle infused with sexual desire progresses to the sheer physicality of fighting among the characters. This is not romantic passion; Lillo’s reformist prose chastises both the animal instincts in human beings and the degrading condition of the society they live in. On the other hand, the *Modernistas* seem detached from the Spanish American social milieu. A closer look at their literary output, though, unveils a reaction against the values upheld by a *bourgeoisie* class that embraced the positivist thinking linked to Realism and Naturalism. In this context, sexual desire was to be regulated and made to conform to society’s needs. Nicaraguan Rubén Darío (1867-1916) wrote poetic short stories that often projected a literary aesthetic. In “The Death of the Empress of China,” under the guise of a flourishing style, a Parisian setting and Oriental allusions, lies an erotic tale of a jealous wife that ends with the destruction of the Chinese statue that alienated her from her

husband. The positioning of desire within the realm of artistic creation —the sculptor’s obsession with the object— is meant, according to Naomi Lindstrom, “to serve as a counterforce to the repressive influence of conservative Catholic-Hispanic culture” (1985, p. 62).

Twentieth and Twenty-first Centuries

It could be argued that in the twentieth century Spanish American literature shines the brightest in the short story. Nevertheless, it is difficult to identify an strictly or exclusively erotic short story writer, because the erotic short story is ultimately a thematic modulation on a genre. Not a history, but an erotics of the short story is best suited to examine the representations and functions of sexualities during this period. This erotics can, in turn, be divided into the laconic, the symbolic and the explicit.

“Cristián threw down the cigar he had just lit and said evenly, ‘let’s get busy, brother. In a while the buzzards will take over. This afternoon I killed her. Let her stay here with all her trinkets, she won’t cause us any more harm’” (Borges 1970, p. 166). The end of “The Intruder,” by Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986), offers the reader a point of departure for the laconic erotic. In these type of stories, explicit sexual imagery is mainly absent; what is found instead are allusions, repressed desires, violence, and death.

The tale of two brothers, the Nielsens, and Juliana Burgos, the woman that Cristián brings to live with them in the Argentine *pampas*, is a love story: Juliana is for Cristián, but Eduardo, the younger brother, falls for her. Once they start sharing her sexually, they start arguing. They sell her to a whorehouse and soon thereafter they are both paying visits to the place; they bring her back home. Because “a man never admits to anyone —not even to himself— that a woman matters beyond lust and possession”, the killing seems unavoidable. One man’s love for a woman, two men’s love for a woman, a woman’s love (or desire) for two men?

A few critics have even suggested homoerotic desire between Cristián and Eduardo, a reading that Borges, always prudish about these matters, vehemently denied. All of this happens without a single overt sexual scene. Nonetheless, desire is undeniably the protagonist in “The Intruder,” and the attempt to eliminate it only strengthens its hold on the narrative.

Before and after Borges parted the waters of the Spanish American short story, two masters of the genre also infused some of their stories with an erotic element that was never totally disclosed. The father of the modern Spanish American short story, Uruguayan Horacio Quiroga (1878-1937), was interested in the role sexuality plays in relationships. In “The Feather Pillow,” the reason given for the death of the young bride—a spider-like animal that, hidden in her pillow, sucked her blood, leaves the reader wandering about the vampire-like qualities of her strange husband. And even if Argentine Julio Cortázar (1914-1984) was more sexually explicit in his novels, “Blow Up,” widely viewed as an experiment with metafiction, is also an erotic story: the central scene of seduction ends up with the protagonist, a translator-photographer, trying to “save” a boy from homosexual initiation. Although this category cuts across the twentieth century, most examples fall between 1910 and 1960, a period wherein the sexual revolution and the rise of feminist consciousness had not yet taken place. The laconic erotic does not, however, shy away from issues of sexual objectifying, dysfunction, or homosexuality.

The translation of Georges Bataille’s seminal work on eroticism into Spanish in 1960 was key for the gradual freeing of literary language from social constraints in Spanish America. During the 1960s there is also an interest in the dialogue between psychoanalysis and sexuality, and the women’s liberation movement begins to have an impact on cultural production. The effect is felt on many fronts: the emphasis on *jouissance* (enjoyment, bliss) and the fragmentation of identity opposes the notion of sexuality linked to procreation, social stability or

instinctual urges; the body is increasingly seen as a political space; “alternative” sexualities surface to the forefront of the social fabric and there is a corresponding rise of homosexual and transsexual issues; and women start their transition from desired objects to desiring subjects.

For the symbolic erotic, stories can be more or less explicit in their depiction of sexuality; however, their erotic content is representative of something beyond. “Lyrics for Salsa and Three Made-to-Order Soneos,” by Puerto Rican Ana Lydia Vega (1946-) is a case in point. In a story rich with the language of the streets, the stereotypical chase between man and woman gets turned upside down. She takes charge, drives to the motel, pays, and gets undressed first. The result: The man excuses his impotence by saying, “I have a stomach-ache” (Menton 1991, p. 700). Vega experiments with three *soneos* (in salsa music, a *soneo* is the improvisational part where the singer goes off the lyrics and sings whatever comes to mind) which function as alternative endings: In the first and the second, the sexual act is consummated; its description mimics both Marxist and feminist discourse. The third one closes with frustration for both lovers and a circular return to the never-ending flirting language from the street man. Sexuality is mixed with humor, but the symbolic erotic in this story speaks about the pitfalls of women’s liberation, about Puerto Rico’s status as a colony of the United States, and about the power of language to demystify issues of economics, politics, and gender.

For Argentine Luisa Valenzuela (1938-) private sexuality is inextricably linked to the political. In “At Night I Am Your Horse,” there is only one sexual scene; the woman narrator says: “I fell asleep with him still on top of me” (Giardinelli 153). The individuals that are looking for the fugitive torture her, and finally she is thrown into jail. Here, the erotic symbolic links sexuality with power and refers to the repressive military regimes prevalent in South America in the 1970s. In a story like “The Orgasmographon,” Mexican Enrique Serna (1959-) presents a

delirious take on science fiction through a case of inverted morality: a totalitarian society where sexual pleasure is the norm and the people must fulfill a quota of orgasms. Accordingly, the Spiritualist Front members will take up the resistance. In these stories, eroticism provides a matrix for social commentary.

The favorite space for the explicit erotic is interpersonal relationships. In “The Cat”, Mexican Juan García Ponce (1932-2003), strongly influenced by Bataille, presents many obsessions within the context of intimacy that constitutes his trademark: the role of desire in daily life, the gaze at the feminine body, the voyeuristic discourse, and a mysterious sexual connection (in this case, between the woman and the cat). García Ponce tries to establish a communion outside established social conventions and closely linked to corporeal language. Two women, Argentine Tununa Mercado (1939-) and Uruguayan Cristina Peri Rossi (1941-) are among the most representative erotic short story writers, largely due to Mercado’s *Canon de alcoba* (1988) and Peri-Rossi’s *Desastres íntimos* (1997). In Mercado’s “To See,” the *motif* of the voyeur in the window gets an objectivist treatment. The ending is surprising: while the woman and the man both reach sexual climax (she by listening on the phone and he by watching, through the window, the woman reach an orgasm while on the phone), the reader realizes the observed was listening precisely to the observer himself, which begs the question of who is watching whom. In Peri Rossi’s “To Love or To Ingest,” sexual acts such as the narrator introducing a cigarette in his lover’s vagina and then smoking it are intertwined with reflections on the relationship between sex and eating and also on his future destiny: “We all become the orphans of pregnant women” (Hughes 2004, p. 6).

The explicit erotic in the Spanish American short story renews old themes and brings forth new ones, but the depiction of sexual content is what changes: more matter-of-fact and

more daring, pushing the limits of what is considered acceptable. This is one of the directions eroticism follows in the Spanish American short story; other writers choose to be laconic or symbolic. Although many taboos still remain well within the twenty-first century, a historic look at the erotic content of many Spanish American short stories reveal that pushing the limits has been, is, and perhaps will be, what defines them.

(2014 words)
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See also *Bataille, Georges*; *Caribbean*; *Cortázar, Julio*; *Cyber sexualities*; *Darío, Rubén*; *Exhibitionism and Voyeurism*; *Latin America*; *Mercado, Tununa*; *Modernismo*; *Peri Rossi, Cristina*; *Psychoanalysis*; *Science Fiction*; *Short stories*; *Valenzuela, Luisa*; *Vega, Ana Lydia*; *Women's Writing: Spanish Language 20th Century*.

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