

## The Creation of Aesthetic Objects in “Un documento” by Clarín

**Craig Dennison, PhD**  
Assistant Professor of Spanish  
Westminster College  
U.S.A.

The best-known work by Leopoldo Alas, nom-de-plume Clarín, is undoubtedly *La Regenta*. In chapter sixteen, which is the first chapter of the second tome, an attention-grabbing scene takes place at the theater of Vetusta in which Ana has the opportunity to view *Don Juan Tenorio* for the first time. As she arrives and takes a seat in the box of the Marquesa of Vegallana, what becomes obvious is that the show is not to be the main attraction that night, but rather Ana herself. Her beauty and demeanor have always inspired both admiration and jealousy, but after her change of confessors, she becomes the focus of all of Vetustan society. The next two pages are devoted in their entirety to the townspeople’s thoughts of Ana and her reaction to their gazes and whispers (546-48). It is a captivating scene in which the major work of art is not, initially, the play itself, but Ana, who has become transformed into an object of study for her friends and fellow citizens.

Much of the criticism of Clarín’s contemporaries or that which came out during the first half-century after his death focused on the religious ideology<sup>1</sup> or the anticlerical views found in his works<sup>2</sup>. Over the past fifty years scholars have concentrated on Clarín’s view of nineteenth-century Spanish society<sup>3</sup> and the literary interplay that occurs in his texts<sup>4</sup>. While all of these themes are important and deserve the attention that they have received, there is another element, just as important, of Clarín’s writing that merits more examination, and that is his perspective regarding artistic creation. His unique outlook on art can be gleaned at times in *La Regenta*, such as in his depiction of Ana as she is put on display before the townspeople at the performance of Zorrilla’s famous drama, but the novel is so extensive and covers so many topics with such depth, that it was impossible for Clarín to focus the entire work on artistic creation. A reliable source of his literary artistic tastes is his literary criticism, although it is usually limited to analyses of contemporary works and does not focus on the creation of art itself. For example, in his essay, “El libre examen y nuestra literatura presente,” he states that Spain was experiencing a boom of quality literature made possible by the introduction of new philosophies (Kraussism, realism and naturalism) and science into Spanish society and schools (69-73).

While he focuses on the changing socio-cultural landscape in Spain and its effects on literary production in this essay, he does not reveal his own ideas regarding artistic creation. It should come as no surprise, however, that these new philosophic movements would come to influence his views on art. Specifically, when examining his views on the *creation* of art, naturalism would prove to be very influential indeed as he believed that studying and writing about, with detail, the true essence of an object leads to the production of better art (“Libros” 86). While some of his ideas about artistic creation can be found in *La Regenta* and his literary criticism, there is one short story that encapsulates his philosophy better than any other. “Un documento,” is a text that is almost completely dedicated to the study of artistic creation and, perhaps just as interesting, the examination of people not only as artists, but as objects, as works of art themselves. An initial reading of “Un documento” presents a complex story of a middle-age woman and her relationship with a naturalist writer. More in-depth readings, however, show the work to focus on the creation of art and reveal Clarín’s clear affinity for naturalism.

Now, before continuing with an analysis of “Un documento,” the term object, in an artistic sense, needs to be examined more thoroughly. In his theory that establishes art as a sign, Jan Mukarovsky proposes that an artistic artifact, that is to say, the work of art itself, is not necessarily an aesthetic object. The work must first be viewed, examined, listened to or studied by a human being before it becomes an aesthetic object (“Función, norma y valor estético” 98). That is to say, an unobserved or unexamined work of art is merely a “sensory work-thing” (“Art as a Semiotic Fact” 87). The work of art is a symbol—a sign—which has meaning both “in the consciousness of the whole collectivity” (87) and on an individual scale.

However, one's personal interpretations of a work of art—Mukarovsky calls these “individual states of consciousness evoked by the work-thing”—create an aesthetic object “through what is common” to all of us (87).

Thus, a work of art observed and analyzed by another human being is no longer merely an artifact; it has become an aesthetic object which has a distinct yet common meaning for all of us. The primary tool that is used in both *La Regenta* and “Un documento” to study the artifact, the work-thing, is the gaze. In Clarín's magnum opus, the reader learns that Ana usually chooses to ignore the crowd's gaze, though on occasion, as when she goes to see the production of Zorrilla's *Don Juan Tenorio*, she embraces such ocular scrutiny:

Ana, acostumbrada muchos años hacía a la mirada curiosa, insistente y fría del público, no reparaba casi nunca en el efecto que producía su entrada en la iglesia, en el paseo, en el teatro. Pero la noche de aquel día de Todos los Santos recibió como agradable incienso el tributo espontáneo de admiración, y no vio en él, como otras veces, curiosidad estúpida, ni envidia ni malicia. (547)

For Ana's counterpart, Cristina, the protagonist of “Un documento,” the public's gaze is a source of curiosity and intrigue. Unlike *la Regenta*, who normally dislikes the spotlight and looks down on her fellow Vetustans for ogling her, Cristina makes her forays into public spheres hoping to attract the crowd's attention. She enjoys being examined by the crowd and being turned into an aesthetic object. It gives her pride to know that her beauty is a source of pleasure for others. However, it is Cristina's desire for the spotlight and her curiosity which will also cause her to look back at the crowd. She begins to examine the multitude of people ogling her like a work of art; she converts them into an aesthetic object. She will fix her gaze upon one man in particular, an artist himself. This reversal of roles will initiate a relationship with Fernando Flores, a writer, and in this relatively short text Clarín will the study of the creation of art with much more depth than in his lengthy masterpiece.

Cristina is a woman with an extraordinary past who has always sought the attention of those around her. A reformed female Don Juan, she is a woman who has recently decided to give up her life of amorous liaisons in favor a quieter lifestyle. For most of her life, Cristina has usually decided to be an object of study for her lovers or for her admiring crowds. Recently, however, after reading works by Spanish mystic poets and Friedrich Schleiermacher, she begins to attempt to live a life filled with more platonic relationships than carnal ones. She tells her hopeful lovers to keep adoring her if they must but that they should not expect anything more from her than the “cariño de madre” (180). Despite her leanings toward a more spiritual lifestyle that follow these readings, she is nevertheless unable to break the attraction that she has always felt toward the attention that she receives from other people. She enjoys being ogled, being a “work-thing” that is turned into an “aesthetic object.” More dangerous than any lover's gaze has always been the ever watchful eye of the public:

Cristina fijaba pocas veces los ojos en los individuos de la multitud, cuyos favores, sin embargo, eran los que más agradecía. El público es siempre el rival más temible; la mujer más fiel se distrae y deja de oír al amante por mirarse en los mil ojos del Argos enamorado, de la multitud que contempla. (181-82)

Here Clarín compares the eyes of the public to those of Argos, the giant with one hundred eyes. At the circus, she is a “work-thing,” an artistic artifact waiting to be viewed by the crowd, in direct competition with the show itself, an artistic artifact forgotten by everyone there, including, it seems, the narrator himself, as Clarín, in this work, does not take time to describe the circus at all. As a realist writer, Clarín focuses on Cristina and not the circus on purpose; he is clearly pointing out which artistic artifact is to be the true aesthetic object for the evening. On a whim, Cristina chooses to turn her eyes on that daunting public that constantly watches over her, and it will be her conversion from object to observer that will create the initial twist in the story. She is an ardent fan of the circus, and attends the show every Friday night. As she turns her eyes to the crowd on the fateful night described by Clarín, her gaze focuses on one man in particular. By fate or circumstance, her gaze is captured by Fernando Flores, a writer of naturalist works. Naturalism was just beginning to gain ground in Spain at that time, in the 1870s, and many of Clarín's works, including this one, are heavily influenced by that literary movement. The intense study of objects to discover the nature, the essence of them, enralls Fernando and his background as a writer of naturalist works cannot be forgotten when examining his role in the text. Fernando is quite surprised when he notices that Cristina, whom he has studied many a time, has begun to cast her gaze on him. He is incredulous at first, and then he comes to realize that indeed she is examining him.

As a writer, Fernando is an observer by nature, not an active participant in social situations, and would never approach a duchess to begin an affair. Thus, Cristina is forced to be the one who will advance things in their relationship as she invites him to her box. Their relationship, which to begin with is solely platonic, is initiated and kept going by Cristina. There are quite a few aspects that “Un documento” shares with *La Regenta*, and the audacity and strength of the women when beginning and maintaining relations is one of those common elements. As Clifford Thompson notes, Ana Ozores also had been the one to take the initiative to make friends with De Pas (67). She also took the major step in advancing her relationship to a physical level with don Álvaro. After her fervor for the Magistral’s ideology ran its course, finally exhausting itself after the procession, she replaces that spiritual, idealistic passion with a more earthly, physical one. Although Álvaro had been pursuing Ana, she was ultimately the one who took their relationship to a physical level as she seduced him on the balcony of the Marchioness’ boudoir at the end of chapter twenty-eight in *La Regenta* (466). However, unlike *la Regenta*, Cristina is not the character in “Un documento” who will seek a sexual relationship; it will be the man, Fernando, who pressures her into that.

During their first meeting they agree on the guidelines that are to protect and oversee their relationship, and these principles indicate a relationship that would have little to do with physical pleasures and more concern with psychological, emotional and spiritual fulfillment (193-94). During the encounter in which Cristina and Fernando form these idealized, philosophical guidelines which are to rule their relationship, the writer notes ill-fated signs. As Fernando steps into Cristina’s carriage, he is reminded of the novel *Madame Bovary*. The site of Emma Bovary’s first amorous encounter with the young lawyer, Léon, was also in a carriage, a ride that lasted all day, to the frustration the poor driver (Flaubert 226-27). Fernando recalls that scene and, at that moment, he asks himself if Cristina has ever read *Madame Bovary*, an indication of his real desires. Fernando (and maybe, on another level, Clarín) understands who Cristina is, that she is an older version of Emma, perhaps Clarín’s vision of what Flaubert’s protagonist would have become if she had not killed herself.

The realization that Cristina may be copy of Emma Bovary will forever disturb Fernando. For him, no matter how hard Cristina tries to change her image, she can never be the idealized mystic or maternal figure who provides a pure love. Because of her past and the ominous connection that Fernando makes with the Frenchwoman, Cristina will forever be tainted in the eyes of the young author. The fact that Cristina has read the poems of the mystics or complex works by German philosophers is largely ignored by Fernando. In Fernando’s mind, Cristina will always be an object of study, not a person doing the studying. This prejudice is not only inherent in the fictitious author, but is also a consistent element in Clarín’s fiction and literary criticism. The subject of women’s reading in Clarín’s works is a fascinating topic, as the female characters in his works who do read are often poor readers. For example, Ana Ozores also had been interested in mystical texts, most notably those of Santa Teresa de Ávila. However, her comprehension of those texts was selective and incomplete, so the themes that Santa Teresa wrote about are never fully understood by Ana, just as the messages of the poetry of San Juan de la Cruz are not truly totally adhered to by Cristina. As Catherine Jaffe argues, Clarín displays a “then common attitude towards women’s instruction: even if they have read some of the classic, traditional texts included in a typical man’s education, women’s assimilation of them is incomplete” (12).

This attitude is readily apparent not only in his fiction, but in his criticism too. Clarín’s views on women and art appear quite simple when reading his criticism of Pardo Bazán. While depicted as a progressive by some contemporary writers, it is only with regard to certain aspects of society, namely those dealing with the corrupt political structure or disreputable religious leaders, that he can be classified as an broadminded freethinker. When considering his views regarding gender roles, he was quite conservative, even misogynistic. In *Nueva Campaña*, a book of his literary criticism, he analyzes *Los Pazos de Ulloa*, arguably the most well-known work by Pardo Bazán. In this critique it is apparent that Clarín ardently supports the status quo regarding gender roles as he cannot come to terms with the fact that a woman could have written a book like *Los Pazos de Ulloa*:

Emilia Pardo, con la vida que hace y que forzosamente tiene que hacer, siendo quien es, no puede conocer ni á los hombres, ni á cierta clase de mujeres, como es indispensable para escribir verdadera novela del mundo. Tenemos ya tres limitaciones: no puede nuestra dama hablar de ciertas cosas, aunque las conozca más ó menos, por ser ella quien es; no puede hablar en la forma que ellas exigen de otras materias que, con un poco de atrevimiento, le es lícito abordar, y además, hay muchos asuntos, los más y mejores de los que debe pintar la novela realista social, que no puede conocerlos Emilia Pardo por causa de las exigencias de su sexo y de su posición en el mundo. (227)

Just as, in Clarín's opinion, Emilia Pardo Bazán's novel is found lacking because she is a woman and could not possibly produce good realism or naturalists texts—which are themselves aesthetic objects—Cristina too will be found wanting in her attempt to create such aesthetic objects out of her artistic artifact, Fernando Flores.

For Fernando, and possibly for Clarín, she will forever merely be a “Magdalena sin Cristo” (195) and he will attempt to break down the barriers that Cristina had established during their first meeting in the carriage. Although he knows that what he is doing is immoral and foolish, Fernando seduces Cristina and they replace their metaphysical relationship with a purely physical one. Like Ana Ozores, Cristina had never fully assimilated the texts that she had read and had only superficially led the lifestyle that they had prescribed. Thus, it is easy for her to replace her interest in spirituality with sensuality: “Cristina sucumbió; el deleite material despertó en ella todos sus instintos de ‘Montón de carne lasciva’ que dijo el poeta. Schleiermacher y los místicos se fueron a paseo, según expresión brutal de ella misma” (196). One can see that, like Ana, Cristina is a character of extremes whose thoughts and feelings can be easily manipulated or changed. Once their relationship takes on a sexual nature, it is quickly dissolved as Fernando abandons Cristina; just as Álvaro had abandoned Ana in *La Regenta* and Rodolphe and Léon abandoned Emma in *Madame Bovary*. The literary twist that occurs at the end of the short story is what differentiates this text from Clarín's great novel. After their break up, Fernando publishes a novel in which the protagonist is based on Cristina.

Maarten Steenmeijer has proposed that there are two types of naturalism examined in “Un documento.” First, there is the naturalism that the author writes about but does not experience firsthand (93). This naturalism is found in the first two novels of Flores, not mentioned by name, which were unsuccessful in the marketplace and not critically acclaimed. The problem with this type of naturalism is that it is not based on experience and without this basis it is impossible to understand or write faithfully about the true nature of the subject. Flores's last novel, based on his experiences with Cristina, is a different type of naturalism, is founded in the author's actual experiences. This is the type of naturalism which will be celebrated by the critics in the story (Steenmeijer 94). This style is more authentic as the author has real life foundations on which to base his text. Furthermore, this is the style which Clarín believed in and championed during the early years of his literary career. The novels he lauded were works by authors such as Galdos and Valera (“El libre examen” 72-73). His first collection of short stories, *Pipá*, and his two novels, *La Regenta* and *Su único hijo*, are all works that adhere to the ideology espoused in this insightful short story.

It turns out that Flores had not merely treated Cristina as an object of desire, but also as an aesthetic object, a work to be studied, and now she will be an object for the masses, for anyone who reads his novel. As she reads a copy of the book, she comes to understand that Fernando had converted their relationship and her life into an object of study. He had been studying her the entire time; he had been continuously turning her into an aesthetic object. Even more interesting, as Cristina reads Fernando's book, she reads herself. Here one can observe Cristina as an aesthetic object on three different levels. She is not only an object for Fernando and the fictitious public of his novel, but also for the “real” audience of Clarín's short story, and finally, in an intriguing set of circumstances in which the aesthetic object studies herself. It is not initially a case of self-reflection, as she is reading herself from Fernando's perspective as a work of art. Only after completing the novel, only then does she realize her role as an artistic artifact that she had played during their affair. She finally understands that she was an “work-thing” to be studied and molded into an aesthetic object and she is forced to admit that Fernando's depiction of her is artistically pleasing, as well as verisimilar.

¡Qué infamia! Fernando no la había amado, la había estudiado. Cuando sus ojos se clavaban en los de Cristina para anegarse en ellos, el traidor no hacía más que echar la sonda en aquel abismo. Como obra de arte, el libro le pareció admirable. ¡Cuánta verdad! Era ella misma; se figuró que se veía en un espejo que retrataba también el alma. En algunos rasgos del carácter no se reconoció al principio; pero reflexionando, vio que era exacta la observación. El miserable no la había embellecido; cuestión de escuela. (197-98)

As Cristina reflects on the novel and her affair with Fernando, she realizes that none of this would have happened had she never returned the gaze, if she had never come to study her audience as they had studied her. For Clarín, Fernando and the public that ogled her, she should have remained an artistic artifact to be examined by the masses. She was never supposed to be the artist. Her place was not to turn the tables on the multitude.

As she contemplates Fernando and his act of artistic creation, she finds satisfaction in categorizing him as a commoner. With this insight, however, she comes to see that her role should have always been that of an aesthetic object. The role of investigator or observer was never to be hers; she should never have looked out into that audience and studied Fernando, an artist who was not meant to be an artistic artifact. “¡Ah, sí, un plebeyo! —se quedó pensando—. ¡La multitud, esa multitud que me admira y me espía! De ahí le saqué... ¡Por algo la miraba yo con miedo!” (198).

The story for Cristina concludes with this awareness, but it does not end for Fernando. As he rejoices in the acclaim that he has been awarded, he is delighted that he was little more than a plebian to Cristina, for he was able to study her successfully as an artifact while she was unable to do the same thing to him (198). Why were his efforts fruitful while Cristina’s were not? It comes down to gender roles, as Clarín has shown himself, specifically in his criticism of Emilia Pardo Bazán and in his fiction. Time after time he upheld the narrowly defined roles for men and women of Restoration Spain. Women, to be naturalist writers in the manner which Clarín would have found acceptable, needed to have the ability to experience all the ugliness and depravity that exists in the real world. Restoration Spain held tight to the established gender roles and, due to women’s second-class position in society, it was not acceptable for them to have the same experiences as men. Inevitably, Cristina comes to the conclusion that Clarín and the social constructs of nineteenth-century Spain demands she come to. Since she is a woman and an artistic artifact with the possibility of being converted into an aesthetic object (on many levels, one for himself as the author, another for Fernando, another for Fernando’s audience and critics and the last one for us, the readers of the short story itself), she is better off being admired and adored, studied and investigated, than doing the admiring and the adoring, the studying and the investigating herself.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Santiago Valentí Camp published a thoughtful examination of Clarín’s religious ideology called *Ideólogos, teorizantes y videntes*. In this work he combines analyses of Clarín by his peers and students with a cursory view of Clarín’s literary production and the confusing and contradictory religious principles that manifest themselves in his work.

<sup>2</sup> There are numerous works that have focused on this aspect of Clarín’s writings. More recently, Eduardo Gil de Muro has written an insightful article on this topic, “El anticlericalismo de Clarín.” Clarín and his anticlerical views have been widely studied, though, and current scholars have focused on other aspects of Clarín’s writings.

<sup>3</sup> For a thorough study of the social critique of Restoration Spain present in Clarín’s works, see *The Decadent Vision in Leopoldo Alas* by Noël Valis.

<sup>4</sup> See *Reading La Regenta: Duplicitous Discourse and the Entropy of Structure* by Stephanie Sieburth for a detailed analysis of the literary techniques used by Clarín in his texts, specifically in *La Regenta*.

## References

- Alas, Leopoldo. “El libre examen y nuestra literatura presente.” *Solos de Clarín*. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1971. 65-78.
- . *La Regenta*. Madrid: Editorial Espasa Calpe, 2006.
- . “Libros.” *Preludios de Clarín*. Oviedo: Instituto de Estudios Asturianos, 1972. 86-87.
- . “Los Pazos de Ulloa.” *Nueva Campaña*. Madrid: Librería de Fernando Fé, 1887. 215-237.
- . “Un documento.” *Pipá*. Madrid: Cátedra, 1976. 179-198.
- Flaubert, Gustave. *Madame Bovary*. Trans. Eleanor Marx Aveling. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2005.
- Gil de Muro, Eduardo. “El anticlericalismo de Clarín.” *VI y VII Ciclo de Conferencias Sobre Oviedo* (1973): 101-18.
- Jaffe, Catherine. “In Her Father’s Library: Women’s Reading in *La Regenta*.” *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos* 39.1 (2005): 3-25.
- Mukarovsky, Jan. “Art as a Semiotic Fact.” *Structure, Sign, and Function: Selected Essays by Jan Mukarovsky*. Eds. John Burbank and Peter Steiner. New Haven: Yale UP, 1978. 82-88.
- . “Función, norma y valor estético como hechos sociales.” *Escritos de estética y semiótica del arte*. Barcelona: Gustavo Gilli, 1975.
- Sieburth, Stephanie. *Reading La Regenta: Duplicitous Discourse and the Entropy of Structure*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1990.
- Steenmeijer, Maarten. “¿Defensa de naturalismo? Sobre “Un documento” de Clarín.” *Foro Hispánico: Revista Hispánica de los Países Bajos* 15 (1999): 91-97.
- Thompson, Jr., Clifford R. “Un documento” de Clarín: un paso hacia *La Regenta*.” *Archivum* 27.27-28 (1977-78): 65-69.
- Valentí Camp, Santiago. *Ideólogos, teorizantes y videntes*. Barcelona: Editorial Minerva, 1922.
- Valis, Noël. *The Decadent Vision in Leopoldo Alas*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1981.