

The Walled City of Cirilo Villaverde- propuesta para el simposio
LA CIUDAD Y LAS LITERATURAS HISPÁNICAS

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In Cirilo Villaverde's iconic 19th century novel *Cecilia Valdés* the well-known dénouement of the romantic and incestuous love triangle plays out tragically in an open space inside the city of Havana. Although the denunciation of slavery has been the main focus of critical interest in this famous novel, the streets and buildings of colonial Havana have, in fact, an important role in the novel's plot. Urban spaces figure prominently also in other lesser known novels in which forbidden or impossible love plots are developed. In this thematic preference -- one could say a rather predictable literary conflict for the Romantic period-- the city exerts an equally important influence in where these illicit passions are experienced by his characters. As it happens in *Cecilia Valdés*, Havana's urban space ---what happens inside or outside not only of the city's walls, but within the house and in public as well—is important in several others of his novels. In the short novels *El Penitente* in *Cuento de mi abuelo* and *Dos amores* the parallels are established not only predictably between city and country as it occurs in *Cecilia Valdés*, but also between the city walls, its open urban spaces and the enclosure of the home.

Havana had a relatively short history as a walled city. Initially built around what is today “Old Havana,” i.e. the colonial sector, they were constructed to protect the city from pirates who had sacked the city in the 18th century. At the end of that century the city walls were laboriously built. Very quickly the city grew exceeding their limits. The walls were taken down in the 1860s. Villaverde’s fiction nevertheless avails itself of the urban space and the concept of walls –what can be done inside and outside—as spatial metaphors for the social repressions imposed on his characters and their brief and tragic flights of freedom.