

MAGIC IN THE BLOOD:
THE EVOLUTION OF COMPLICITY AND SOCIAL AWARENESS
IN ALLENDE'S *THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS*

MADLYN ROSE HAGAN

Many critics of Isabel Allende's Chilean epic *The House of the Spirits* set the precedent that Esteban Trueba and his wife Clara are a representative microcosm of Chilean politics, placing Clara as the representation of the liberal left wing, and depicting Esteban as the conservative right wing. Despite this often-claimed assertion- many critics ignore or resist the implication it brings with it. If Clara the clairvoyant represents Chile's left wing, in what ways does she fail those she is responsible for? The citizens of Tres Marias, and her daughters as well fall under the umbrella of her husband's tyranny, and despite Clara's responsibility, her own role is often glossed over and misrepresented.

Magical realism has a weighty history in South American literature. Described by literary critic Angel Flores as the solution to the "blind alley" of photographic realism, Flores identifies modern magic realism as a reclamation of magic in the literature of the region (Flores 188). Until the revival of magical realism in the 1920s, the literary canon of South American literature was dominated by realism, romantic or otherwise- described by critic Peter Earle as the "basic ritual of Latin American literature" (Earle 543). Allende's work is part of this reclamation but is unique in the fact that it is dominated by larger-than-life female characters. The feminine identity that Allende creates in this work is powerful and occupies central roles in the family outside of the traditional nurturer: these women are matriarchs, spiritual guardians, biographers, and storytellers. Magic moves through the blood of Allende's mothers and daughters, and she manages capture a uniquely cyclic history of one family through the inheritance of gifts- magic or otherwise.

One of many children, Clara del Valle lives a life sheltered by loving parents. Clara exists a world away from her family because of her growing magical

abilities and gifts of clairvoyance and precognition. Later in life, Clara would also be distanced from her husband. One of the only things that Esteban Trueba inherits from his impoverished family is his land, Tres Marias, and the families that have occupied it for years. Bringing order to Tres Marias (which had fallen into squalor) is methodical for Esteban. Little by little, he restores its functionality, raping and abusing its citizens all the while, he creates a reputation of fear through these actions. After Clara and Esteban are married, Esteban gives up his pillaging (if only temporarily) and the two find an uneasy balance. The oldest of their three children, Blanca, falls in love with a communist-rebel worker on Tres Marias and soon realizes she is pregnant with a daughter, Alba, who would grow up in the bloodiest years of Chilean history. The novel takes place through these generations of women, spanning through a tumultuous period in Chile, with the violent political climate erupting alongside familial tensions.

To Esteban, Clara is not quite human, and his continued exaltation of her turns her into something to be possessed. That she is *truly* unattainable to him, only makes him desire her more and lash out when he cannot conquer her. While on their honeymoon, after he and Clara have consummated their marriage, Esteban realizes that “Clara did not belong to him”, in spite of his marriage to her (Allende 96). Peter Earle notes that Esteban Trueba is characterized by “will—that is will unenlightened by knowledge; impelled rather by an atavistic urge for self-assertion” (Earle 547). The manner in which Allende characterizes Esteban’s relationship to Clara is a story of conquest, “[Esteban] wanted control over that undefined and luminous material that lay within her and that escaped him even in those moments when she appeared to be dying of pleasure,” Esteban has married Clara, has become intimate with her, and yet still because of her unending occupation with the spirits around her, he cannot possess her in the manner he so wants to. Clara is defined in terms of the otherworldly and insubstantial. This characterization defines Clara through the entirety of Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* and lends itself to the idea that Clara must be taken care of, further ingraining the idea that she *can not* be held responsible for her role in the crimes of her husband.

Clara’s continued interest and involvement with the disenfranchised populations at Tres Marias, as well as the poor neighborhoods of the capital, creates tension between her and her husband. “They don’t need charity, they need justice,” Clara explains to her daughter, and many years before this, Clara is aware of the disparity of her own mother’s suffragette agenda in the face of abject poverty and squalor. Upon hearing this Esteban Trueba launches into a tirade about “justice”. He equates Clara’s interest in the plight of the poor to Pedro Tercero’s (leader of a communist insurrection in Tres Marias) whisperings of revolution, and the old socialist adage of hens and foxes: that if the hens are treated terribly long enough, eventually they will band together and overpower the fox that

torments them. This argument seems to be the same microcosm of the political climate of Chile in this period, with leftist Clara on one side and Esteban speaking for the conservative politicians. Critic Peter Earle refers to the two as the family's "vital, antithetical nucleus. The latter [Esteban] embodies privileged power; the former [Clara], humanitarian resistance" (Earle 547). However, in making this assertion, Earle overlooks Clara's failings. Doing so limits the character and responsibility of Clara and her effect on the generations that come after her. To be sure, Clara is capable of profound empathy and emotional depth, and she is aware of the suffering of others, but she is acutely unaware of her own privilege and responsibility for those who depend upon her.

Clara is often unaware of reality; for years she has been doted upon, first by her mother and Nana, then her husband, and later, by her sister-in-law Ferula. She is loved, adored, worshipped. There is something about her dreamy, delicate nature that implies helplessness and innocence. Understanding the character of Clara as a complex one, not simply "The Clairvoyant" allows more depth in the character and the impact she has on the generations after her. The reader falls in love with Clara for her magic, spirituality, and far-away disposition, therefore, it is easy to overlook her failings and flaws. Compared to her husband's sins, Clara's are easy to gloss over, but if we are intended to understand the two as a representation of Chile's political climate as critics such as Peter Earle and Sarah Cooper assert, how is Clara's complicity to be understood? How do we reconcile these sins with the adoration that is so deserved? The crimes of her husband have dire consequences but so does Clara's complicity in these crimes.

Esteban refers to rapes as "tussles in the hay," in which he sweeps some daughter of a campesino onto his horse, only to force himself on her. When Esteban considers telling Clara this in order to get some impassioned reaction from her, he notes: "that if he told his wife about them she would be appalled by his mistreatment of other women but not by his infidelity to her" (Allende 129). Despite Esteban withholding this information from Clara, she later reveals she knew that Esteban raped the young women of Tres Marias, and refers to his actions so flippantly that we can infer that she knew for an indeterminable amount of time and did nothing.

Clara is not perfect; in fact, she is flawed in ways so fundamental that they effect and impact the women that come after her. No Trueba woman is untouched by Clara. Her daughter remains intimately involved in her mother's life (and vice versa) until Clara's death. Esteban's limited involvement in Blanca's day-to-day life makes Clara the primary influence on their daughter- barring Nana's matronly presence and maternal affections. Blanca's relationship to her mother is described in terms of mutual understanding instead of traditional bonding. Despite Clara's apparent disinterest in Blanca's upbringing, the two are bonded to one another and find comfort in that closeness. It is Clara who changes Blanca: teaches her the art of communication with her unborn, defends her to

Esteban (losing her teeth in the process), gives Blanca comfort with the otherworldly that allows her trust her instinct and investigate Jean de Satigny's depravity.

Despite Clara's philanthropy, her *meaningful* contributions to the poor are null. She makes no true progress on behalf of the disenfranchised. She understands and recognizes the disparity on Tres Marias, and even her husband's own depravity, but her dreamy attitude somehow absolves her of responsibility. Despite the number of critics that recognize these two familial heads as a microcosm of the Chilean political climate, few recognize the manner in which Clara fails the people of Tres Marias. Some critics deny or ignore her complicity in her husband's crimes, but it is important to recognize that Clara's spiritual presence does not pardon her. It is easy for the reader to forgive Clara for her involvement, – or lack thereof,- in her husband's affairs because of her proclaimed disinterest in the physical reality, but to do so would stunt the character of Clara, and the implication of her indifference, as well as discount the efforts made by her daughter and granddaughter. Her granddaughter becomes a revolutionary, taking steps where her mother and grandmother failed to before her, inciting change though it nearly results in her death.

Alba takes up Clara's storytelling tradition, crafting the story of *The House of the Spirits* with the help of her grandfather. The novel comes full circle. It is begun by Alba's narrative, and it ends in her narrative, creating a cyclical history of the Trueba family. "Barabbas came to us by sea", says the child Clara in her diary, beginning the story. It is in these same words that the story ends. Alba uses Clara's diaries to craft the long and winding history of her own family as well reconcile her own trauma. The idea comes to her when she is isolated after the worst parts of her torture by her uncle, Esteban Garcia. After days of torture, Alba realizes that "he was not trying to learn Miguel's true whereabouts but to avenge himself for injuries that had been inflicted on him from birth" (Allende 411). She starts the story to keep her sanity, and let go of her fear, helped by the spirit of her grandmother Clara. Eventually, the story of her family relieves her of the heat of hatred.

Nivea is decapitated, Clara loses her teeth, Blanca never has the family she so desires, and Alba is impregnated by her uncle and rapist. Esteban Trueba dies having been redeemed by his daughter's story and his wife's spirit. There is no justice the way that we hope for. Allende values storytelling, she creates strong women who uplift one another, and yet at the end of the novel, there is no retribution. Alba herself remarks on the vicious cycle which has attempted to victimize her: "an unending tale of sorrow, blood, and love," and her only attempt at recompense is the understanding that she must "break that terrible chain" (Allende 432). We are left with the understanding that the only way to undo generations of circumstances that victimize us, power structures that do not serve us, is to make the step to break the chain. However, it is through

generations of effort and impact that truly make these changes, and each generation must do more than the last. Allende's solution is generational.

WORKS CITED

- Allende, Isabel. *The House of the Spirits*. Bantam Books, 1989.
- Cooper, Sarah. "Family Systems and Subversion in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*." *Interdisciplinary Literary Studies: a Journal of Criticism and Theory*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2008, pp. 16–33.
- Earle, Peter G., and Allende. "Literature as Survival: Allende's 'The House of the Spirits.'" *Contemporary Literature*, vol. 28, no. 4, 1987, pp. 543–554. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1208317. Accessed 12 Feb. 2020.
- Flores, Angel. "Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction." *Hispania*, vol. 38, no. 2, 1955, pp. 187–192. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/335812. Accessed 12 Feb. 2020.