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THE HISTORICAL SPIRIT IN ISABEL ALLENDE'S

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University of Alabama, Huntsville: Honors Project - Spanish 499
Dr. Linda Maier
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I live in a continent where the family is very important, so it seemed natural to tell the story of a country and a continent through the eyes of a family. My theory is that in my continent the state is generally my enemy. It’s every single citizen’s enemy. You can’t hope for anything from the state. You can only hope for repression, taxes, corruption, inefficiency. Where is your protection, your security? In your family, and to the extent that you have your tribe around you, you’re safe. That’s why the family is so important, and that’s why it’s constantly present in Latin American literature… (Allende, Women Writers 36).

Isabel Allende’s novel, La casa de los espíritus (The House of the Spirits, 1982), portrays characters and events from recent Chilean history through the fictionalized account of a family. It is Chilean history "reenacted through fiction" (Rojas, Critical Approaches 3). Like a historical or political allegory, Allende’s novel imaginatively recreates historical personages and events; her work both instructs and entertains. The technique of magic realism underscores the fusion of the everyday and the fantastic inherent in Latin America. While Allende exploits this technique to draw attention to an ominous period in twentieth-century Chile, she also uses it to express her compatriots’ resilience and hope for a better future. In the face of shocking atrocities, the magic of the human spirit triumphs. Through her fictionalization of Chilean history, Allende has created a universal cautionary tale.

Seemingly paradoxically, then, Chilean history comes to life in Allende’s fiction. The purpose of this paper is to point out the historical and political sources of Allende’s novel and explore the fictionalization of reality so prevalent among Latin American writers. This study of the text will enhance the understanding of both scholars and the broader North American public unfamiliar with Chile.

The action of the novel takes place in two main locations, the house on the square in an urban Latin American capital city (namely, Santiago, Chile) and the rural farm known as Tres
Marías. In these surroundings reside the family members who represent a cross section of Chilean society and personify its socioeconomic classes as well as expected gender roles. The novel follows these characters for approximately seventy years, from the beginning of the century to the military coup led by General Augusto Pinochet in 1973. These characters encounter not only political but also social and gender barriers. Many of the fictitious members of the oligarchy—the Truebas and the del Valles—are based on actual members of Allende's family. A wide cast of secondary characters, likewise drawn from real individuals, represents the peasantry (the García family), the proletariat (Miguel, and Amanda), those on the margins of society (Tránsito Soto and Férrula), and members of the professional classes (the Candidate/President, the Poet, and the dictator). Allende has given many of these characters symbolic names that sketch their main features.

"I think communicating is terribly important for a writer, because a book begins to exist only when another person picks it up. Before that it's only an object, some pieces of paper glued together that become a book only after someone else picks it up" (Allende, Women Writers 25).

Isabel Allende combines the oral tradition of storytelling and the written word to convey her aims in this novel. She acquired these two types of communication in her youth. Living with her grandparents for much of her childhood, she was greatly influenced by the stories they told her. Also, Allende learned at an early age to read and had a great love of words. The novel combines the first-person accounts of Esteban Trueba, Alba's grandfather, from his memories as told to Alba with the written word of Clara's notebooks, Blanca's letters, and the ledgers of Tres Marías as read by the omniscient narrator Alba, who only speaks in the first person at the very beginning and end of the novel. Both first-person accounts are narrated in the present while intercalated between them are narratives of the past and future related in present tense. There is a labyrinth of references to the future (premonitions such as Clara's knowing at
conception the sex and number of her unborn babies) and the past (incidents of parallelism or déjà vu such as the bathing of Clara first by Nana and then by Férua).

The novel is a mixture of the masculine (Esteban) and the feminine (Clara, Blanca, Alba), the historical and the magical or fictional, oral tradition and the written word. In the end, these all come together. The reader is exposed to both the masculine and feminine points of view and sees them mesh as Esteban Trueba's hard-line, conservative, patriarchal worldview bent on action and control mellows, and the feminine view prone to love and understanding adapts to the harsher, more pragmatic side of life. Likewise, the novel presents two different viewpoints: one historical and fact-laden and another of an imaginative nature. The spirituality of the Trueba-del Valle women confronts the historical outlook of brutal political realities with the imprisonment and torture of Alba. The spoken words by Esteban and the written words of the Trueba women serve to bring all of the above aspects together. Yet the written word is also connected to silence. Clara begins writing her notebooks during a period of silence after witnessing the death and violation of her sister Rosa. She again remains mute when pregnant and after being physically abused by Esteban. Blanca corresponds with her mother while being forced to live with Count Jean de Satigny, a man she does not love and with whom she cannot communicate. Alba begins to write upon encouragement from Clara's spirit during her confinement and torture in the *perrera* (solitary confinement). Furthermore, Allende states that her novel is written for those who are still silent and unable to use the spoken word:

For whom do I write...? Certainly for myself. But mainly for others, even if there are only a few. For those who have no voice and for those who are kept in silence. For my children and my future grandchildren. For Alexandra Jorquera [a young Chilean girl] and others like her. I write for you (Allende, *Writing As an Act of Hope* 62).

The purposes of her novel are then twofold. Allende believes it is the duty of those who are able to do so, to speak for those held in silence. Also, she writes the novel for another
reason: "to reclaim the past and overcome terrors of my own" (Allende, La casa 3). She does not want this part of history to be forgotten, and she believes that a written record documenting this history will help her overcome the death of her uncle, slain president Salvador Allende, and her own exile from her beloved country.

One day I got a phone call from Chile saying that my grandfather, who was going to be a hundred, was very tired and had decided to die. He had stopped eating and drinking, and he sat in his chair to wait for death. At that moment I wanted so badly to write and tell him that he was never going to die, that somehow he would always be present in my life, because he had a theory that death didn't exist, only forgetfulness did. He believed that if you can keep people in your memory, they will live forever. That's what he did with my grandmother. So I began to write him a long letter... (Allende, Women Writers 24-25).

The novel began as a letter to Isabel Allende's grandfather, the last immediate relative living in Chile after the 1973 military coup. He was about to turn one hundred years of age and had begun to will himself to die. He was convinced that spiritual immortality depended on being remembered by others. Allende set out to write him a letter assuring him that she had not, nor would not ever forget him or her country. She never sent the letter to her grandfather, but she did continue to set down in writing her notion of reality and magical occurrences. This manuscript came to be the novel, La casa de los espíritus.

"¿Qué es la historia de América toda, sino una crónica de lo real maravilloso?" (Alejo Carpentier in the prologue to El reino de este mundo).

The term magic realism was coined by Franz Roh in his book Nachexpressionismus (magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten europäischer Malerei (1925) and has been applied to French, German, Italian, and North American art and literature. However, it has been increasingly used since World War II to describe Latin American fiction by authors as Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez. There are many definitions of magic realism. A narrow
interpretation explains it as a fusion of the everyday and the fantastic. In an interview Isabel Allende has stated her definition of magic realism:

[It is] the spiritual and emotional aspect of literature.... It is present in many different forms of expression in all of the underdeveloped world. When we live in permanent contact with all types of violence and misery, it is important to search for explanations and to find hope in the supernatural. The reality is so brutal that we need the refuge of a magical or spiritual world (qtd. in Bautista 308-my translation).

In numerous interviews Isabel Allende has explained that in most Latin American countries the dividing line between the real and the fantastic becomes very blurred; it is necessary to admit the possibility of the impossible. For instance, miracles are beyond human imagination. Wartime also offers many seemingly legendary incidents. Such events are generally considered extraordinary while in Latin American countries such as Chile, they are deemed banal. So what seems magical becomes intertwined with empirical reality in such a way that the two cannot be easily separated:

Not only in Latin America but everywhere in the world there are things that are invisible that we systematically deny: emotions, passions, dreams, superstitions, myths, legends. They are everywhere all the time, and they affect our lives. It’s the same in Germany or in the United States as it is in Latin America and Africa and India. But it seems that in what you call the Third World we are willing to accept those realities too. We cannot control everything in our reality. We know that there is a dimension of uncertainty in which we move constantly, and that is what in literature has been translated as magic realism (Allende, Contemporary Authors 7).

Isabel Allende also draws attention to the fact that one person’s perception of reality may radically differ from that of another. For example, the bourgeoisie has a different perspective of reality than the proletariat. Due to the extreme class differences in most Latin American countries, it is easy to see why Allende, like many other Latin American writers, employs the technique of magic realism.
"The House of the Spirits begins in the tradition of magical realism, but as it continues, it becomes less and less [so]... until finally there is no longer magic but only realism, and the novel becomes the tragic political history of Chile" (Antoni 21).

The opening four chapters of the novel perfectly illustrate the conventional view of magic realism. Examples include Rosa’s green hair and mermaid-like body and Clara’s clairvoyance and ability to play the piano without touching it and levitate drinking glasses from the table. In fact, most of the magic realism in the novel centers on Clara. However, this most noticeable form of magic realism tapers off in Chapter 5 when a natural disaster occurs which destroys much life and property: "The earthquake signaled such an important change in the life of the Trueba family that from then on they divided all events into before and after that day" (Allende, La casa 139). This devastation greatly affects Clara and the magic that normally surrounds her. She seems to "become an ordinary down-to-earth woman. ‘You’ve changed, Mama,’ Blanca said. ‘It’s not me who’s changed,’ her mother replied. ‘It’s the world’" (144). Fantasy elements continue to fade until Clara’s death in Chapter 9. At this point "the magic dissipates, and The House of the Spirits becomes a novel of historical realism" (Antoni 24). The only magic realism that now appears is the presence of fictional characters set against a historical backdrop and the recurrent apparition of Clara’s ghost to Alba and Esteban. The horror of the unbelievable occurrences is a political reality not only for Chile but for many other Latin American countries which have suffered and continue to suffer military takeovers and dictatorships.

It is also perhaps significant that the magic or spiritual in the novel dissipates not only with Clara’s death, but also as the Trueba-del Valle women become progressively more politically active. With Clara’s death much of the magic dies as well. Yet her daughter and granddaughter have each inherited to a certain degree Clara’s spiritual nature, so the novel’s magical charm does not vanish altogether. Even though Clara’s life was filled with psychic power such as the parapsychologists and the Mora sisters, Clara also possessed a certain amount
of political consciousness. Her mother, Nívea, had been a suffragette, and Clara had become very aware of the injustice not only to women but especially to the poor. She later takes food and gifts to the poor with Blanca at her side, just as she had done with her mother. Yet she tells Blanca, "This is to assuage our conscience, darling…. But it doesn’t help the poor. They don’t need charity; they need justice" (Allende, La casa 117). Blanca becomes even more entangled in politics as she falls in love with revolutionary folk singer Pedro Tercero García and his socialist ideas. Alba becomes a political activist when she falls in love with Miguel (a radical) and is arrested by the new military regime. With each new step of political awareness in the Trueba women, a bit of the magic is lost, and the novel evolves into a horrifying yet real picture of Chilean political and social history.

As mentioned previously, the novel takes place in two distinctly different locations: the large house on the square built by Esteban Trueba for Clara and himself in the capital city (Santiago, Chile) and Tres Marías, the family farm near San Lucas that he inherited. These two locations represent different milieux peopled by distinct social classes. These two settings allow the author to contrast Chile’s socioeconomic classes, revealing their lives and political involvement (Hernán-Gómez 338-339).

"His house would be the reflection of himself, his family, and the prestige he planned to give the surname that his father had stained" (Allende, La casa 81).

The spacious house on the corner constructed by Esteban was an expensive, immense "solemn, cubic, dense, pompous house which sat like a hat amid its green and geometric surroundings" (81). Yet Clara would transform the great house "into an enchanted labyrinth that was impossible to clean and that defied any number of state and city laws" (81).

[It] would end up full of protuberances and incrustations, of twisted staircases that led to empty spaces, of turrets, of small windows that could not be opened, doors hanging in midair, crooked hallways, and portholes… (93).
Ultimately, the house plays a central role in the novel because it is a metaphor for the hopes of the Trueba-del Valle family and therefore of all Chile. Not only does Clara transform the house into a labyrinth, but she also fills it with life: there are birds, parapsychologists, poets, all kinds of marginal characters, and especially spirits. With natural disasters such as a great earthquake and the advent of familial, social, and political crises, the house falls into disrepair as do both the family and the nation. As the family and nation rebuild, the house undergoes restoration. Later in the novel, it shelters the hungry, disappeared, and persecuted. By the end of the novel it has fallen into ruin, as have the family and the country as a result of the military coup. Upon her release from prison, Alba and Esteban once again open the windows and fill the house with birds as Clara had done. The spirits dwell once again in the house.

The great house on the corner is fictional, yet it is based on the home of Isabel Allende's grandparents where she spent much of her childhood after her father disappeared. Their house was also large and deteriorated with many rooms and creaking doors that led to the belief in ghosts (qtd. in Coddou, "Para leer" 127). There was also a large basement where Allende spent much time reading books:

One of my most vivid memories is of my grandparents' cellar where I used to read by candlelight, dream of magic castles...build forts out of an entire series of books that one of my uncles wrote about India, and then fall asleep among the spiders and mice. That dark, damp cellar was full of discarded objects...and ghosts. Time was suspended down there, trapped in a bubble.... It was a beautiful world where the imagination knew no limits (Allende, Women Writers 24).
No one's going to convince me that I wasn't a good patrón. Anyone who saw Tres Marías in decline and who could see it now, when it's a model estate, would have to agree with me. That's why I can't go along with my granddaughter's story about class struggle. Because when it comes right down to it, those poor peasants are a lot worse off today than they were fifty years ago. I was like a father to them. Agrarian reform ruined things for everyone (Allende, La casa 46).

While Tres Marías does not remain untouched by Clara's magical transformations, it is more a patriarchal establishment than the great house in the city. Esteban furnishes it with more masculine furniture and controls the farm and its farmers with an iron hand. As with the house on the corner, Tres Marías also falls into disrepair when there are natural disasters or political and social crises, and is repaired when life improves. Tres Marías is a fictional farm, but it represents the many similar farms found outside the cities. It is here that the reader becomes aware of the life of the peasants and their interaction with those of the upper class and the landowners.

"The only autobiographical element in La casa de los espíritus is the whole household: that family, those people, are like mine, but I'm not there" (Allende, Women Writers 35).

Many of the fictional characters found in La casa de los espíritus are based on Allende's actual family members. The first group consists of the maternal branch of the Trueba-del Valle family tree: Clara, Blanca, and Alba. The second group is the legitimate male line of the Trueba-del Valle family: Esteban, Jaime, and Nicolás.

"Clara is the great spiritual mother of us all" (Allende, Interviews with Latin American Writers 17).

Clara is the spiritual matriarch of the family and together with her conservative husband Esteban, is one of the main characters of the novel. It is her spirit that pervades the great house in the city and that is transmitted to her daughter and granddaughter. Clara is clairvoyant and
engages in parapsychology and spiritualism. As has already been mentioned, most of the novel’s magic realism centers on her. For a woman of her time, Clara is exceptionally politically active. She feeds the hungry in the city, teaches the women on the farm how to better care for themselves, and is aware of the social injustice in her country. With the aid of the notebooks that Clara writes during her lifetime, her granddaughter, Alba, is able to narrate much of the novel.

The fictional character of Clara is based on Isabel Allende’s maternal grandmother, also named Isabel. Allende has stated that it was necessary merely to embellish the facts to create a character derived from her grandmother:

Clara del Valle is exactly the same as my grandmother, although I exaggerated her a little. For instance, my grandmother couldn’t play the piano with the cover down. But it is true that she was a spiritualist and a clairvoyant. I come from a family of very crazy people; I haven’t had to invent anything. My grandmother was the craziest of the whole family, she was wonderful, she lived apart from all material things in a spiritual world, experimenting with a table with three legs to speak with the souls of the dead (17).

"Blanca is the great earthly mother, she fulfills all the household tasks" (17).

Blanca is the daughter of Clara and Esteban. She looks after the family and house while Clara practices spiritualism. She disgraces Esteban by falling in love with the son of a peasant farmer on Tres Marías. This was doubly scandalous not only because of her socioeconomic status, but also because her lover would prove to be an antiestablishment socialist revolutionary. Blanca is forced to marry the Count Jean de Satigny after she becomes pregnant with the revolutionary’s child. She subsequently returns with her daughter to live in the great house with Clara and Esteban. To Esteban’s shame, she remains in love with Pedro Tercero García and his socialist values. Alba is able to write an account of these events drawn from personal experience as well as from Blanca’s correspondence with Clara, her mother.
The fictional character of Blanca is similar to Isabel Allende’s mother in several respects. Allende’s father abandoned the family when she was quite young. She, and the rest of her family—her mother and two brothers—lived apart from him in the home of her maternal grandparents. Like Alba, Allende feels a great bond not only with her grandmother, but also with her mother: “My mother was the most important person in my childhood, and she has been the most important person in my life. She’s my friend, my sister, my companion” (Allende, Women Writers 23). Furthermore, Allende has also stated that her mother edits all her novels and that they write daily letters to one another when apart.

"Alba is the great intellectual mother" (Allende, Interviews with Latin American Writers 17).

Alba is the novel’s omniscient narrator and the first-person narrator at the very beginning and end. Not only is she the daughter of a proletarian socialist revolutionary, but she also falls in love with a radical in college and becomes actively involved and eventually tortured in the struggle for justice. Although they possess differing social and political views, Alba and her grandfather Esteban remain very close in the novel. Alba may be seen as a bridge that connects both sides of issues such as social and political reform. In the end she is rescued by her grandfather, and the child she carries represents hope for the country’s future and the resolution of its internal differences.

Allende has stated that the fictional role of Alba is not based upon herself, as has been speculated. She resembles Allende in that she puts fragments of the novel in order. Yet the character was inspired by the many real women involved in the political struggle in Chile in 1973 and after. Alba is a generic character whose function is to illustrate these women’s version of history.
"Clara, Blanca, and Alba... embody historical awareness and intuitive understanding. Their role throughout the novel is the preservation of moral and social conscience and civic responsibility" (Earle 551).

In addition to those previously mentioned, autobiographical elements of Allende can be found as the lives of the novel’s fictional characters unfold. For example there are several correlations between Clara’s and Allende’s lives. Barrabás was the name of Clara’s pet dog as well as Allende’s, who also died in a like manner. The notebook given to Clara as a child by her mother is akin to the notebook given to Allende in her youth. Clara’s dislike for organizations such as the church, for example in the first chapter, is strongly paralleled by Allende’s dislike for organizations:

I collaborate whenever I can. I don’t belong to any group, political or religious or social.... It’s just that I am a very chaotic person. I think I’m an anarchist! I can never accept the rules and I’m always defying all forms of authority. Everything that’s organized, I’m always against. So I’m a terrible member of anything (Trotsky, 130).

Rebellion at the Catholic school against the nuns is a uniform event with Clara and Allende. Clara’s feeding of the poor and persecuted is also congruent with Allende’s life in Chile as she at one time headed a food and hunger organization. Furthermore, the character of Blanca is similar to Allende in that she also provided food and shelter for the poor and persecuted and that she became an exile from her home country. Finally, there are also parallel characteristics and occurrences in Alba’s and Allende’s lives. Alba as well as Allende have a great love for books. Both were required to identify their dead fathers at the morgue but did not recognize them because they had not seen their fathers since a very young age. After the military coup, Alba hid the persecuted and transported them to the embassies, and she documented stories of the tortured and imprisoned which is congruent with Allende’s life before leaving the country fifteen months after the event.
"It's a novel where the main character, the spinal column of the novel, is a man, a patriarch, and throughout the narrative frame of the story he's surrounded by a succession of women" (Allende, Women Writers 30).

Esteban is the only character who appears throughout the entire novel. He was the son of Doña Ester, an "heir to the noblest and most highborn surname of the viceroyalty of Lima;" and an immigrant father, who was soon to be discovered a "good-for-nothing" after squandering "first her dowry and then her inheritance" before abandoning the family (Allende, La casa 40). Although the family had a patrician name, Esteban was forced from a young age to work hard to support his mother and sister, Férule. He owned a small mine and after Rosa’s death, restored the family estate of Tres Marías to working order. Esteban was considered a good but harsh master. His tenant farmers would eventually have better houses and such extras as a school that the neighboring ranches did not have. However, Esteban could be a very hard man. He was very much a patriarchal and conservative figure both in his home and in society. He eventually comes to love Clara very much, although she is very different from his expectations of the bourgeois woman; yet he is tormented that he is never able to completely dominate her.

*My grandfather was a patriarch, a strong, intolerant man, predisposed to uncontrollable passions, that died when he was near one hundred years old, in plain possession of his mental faculties, crippled and spent, but without wrinkles, with a lion-like mane of hair and blue eyes as penetrating and lucid as in his youth. He was a magnificent character for a book (qtd. in Coddou, "Para leer" 131-my translation).*

Allende created the character of Esteban Trueba in the image of her maternal grandfather whose imminent death inspired the novel itself. Allende’s description of her grandfather reveals both his flaws and virtues: "He was a violent old man, conservative, reactionary, machista [male-chauvinist], fantastic for a book. I adored my grandfather despite his immense defects.
He was a tender, kind-hearted and very authentic man" (qtd. in Coddou, "Para leer" 131-my translation). The reader of the novel recognizes both of these sides of Esteban also. Despite Esteban’s hard, cruel, and callous nature, the reader never totally despises him because his positive attributes retain the reader’s sympathy.

"In time, both of them would know hunger: Jaime out of solidarity with the poor, and Nicolás to purify his soul (Allende, La casa 180).

Jaime and Nicolás are twin sons born to Clara. Like many incidents in the novel, the joy of birth coincides with the untimely death of Clara’s parents, Nívea and Severo. Jaime becomes a tall man of average appearance, while Nicolás is a shorter, handsome man. Though they are twins, they are "ideologically incompatible" (Earle 550). Nicolás is a selfish individual who has all types of strange worldly and spiritual pursuits. He is a playboy, who at one point earns his living by teaching flamenco dance. He takes drugs and is constantly being rescued from trouble by Jaime. He only looks after his own interests throughout his entire life, and the reader finally learns that he has gone to the United States to found "an Institute for Union with Nothingness" (551). On the other hand, Jaime is altruistic. He is a very studious medical student and works at a public clinic for the poor. He becomes a socialist and befriends Pedro Tercero García. In the end he is killed during the military coup because he refuses to betray his beliefs or the President of the Socialist Party.

At the time that Allende lived with her grandparents, unmarried uncles also lived in the house who greatly affected Allende’s life as they did Blanca’s and Alba’s. One of the uncles owned a large book collection that covered his bedroom wall. Allende’s uncle permitted his niece to read anything she wished. Indications of this early uncensored reading, her favorite authors appear throughout the novel. For example, Allende was expelled from a parochial
school for reading the Marques de Sade, and the sadistic character of Count Jean de Satigny, Blanca’s husband, is unmistakable. In fact, Allende has instilled this same love of reading, as well as tolerance to varying types of knowledge (such as differing political philosophies), within the character and experiences of Alba. (It is also interesting to note that Allende’s son is also named Nicolás as is one of the twins.)

A third group of characters does not represent particular individuals (with the exception of Pedro Tercero García), but rather segments within Chilean society. The García family symbolizes the peasantry. Miguel and Amanda represent the proletariat, while Férula and Tránsito Soto represent the marginal individuals in society. Pedro Tercero García however, not only represents a specific socioeconomic class, but also incarnates many of the characteristics of a famous contemporary Chilean singer.

"The only amusement then was castrating pigs and bulls, cockfights, hopscotch, and the incredible tales of old Pedro García, may he rest in peace" (Allende, La casa 47).

Pedro García is the charismatic elder of the family, who is beyond the age of doing any physical work. However, he "had fought in the ranks of the patriots who kicked the Spaniards out of America" and therefore is highly respected by his people (47). He is both a storyteller and medicine man well versed in folk remedies. He represents the peasant class who gladly gave their lives in the fight for independence from Spain (or other similar colonial powers), but were then oppressed and even forgotten.
Trueba knew that this unformed peasant was more intelligent than the others. He was the only one who knew how to read or carry on a conversation more than three sentences long. He was the closest thing to a friend that Trueba had within a radius of fifty miles, but his monumental pride prevented him from recognizing in the man any virtues beyond those that marked him as a good peon (54).

Pedros García’s son, Pedro Segundo García, becomes Esteban’s foreman on the farm. He is a quiet, loyal, and hard-working man even though he despises the landlord. He has much common sense and worldly knowledge, but Esteban never regards him as an equal. However, he becomes a very good friend and confidant to Clara after Esteban’s injury and eventually leaves the farm after Esteban’s brutal treatment of his son, Pedro Tercero, and Clara’s death. When confronted with his son’s antiestablishment ideas, the uneducated Pedro Segundo replies: "That’s the way it’s always been, son. You can’t change the law of God" (140). Like so many others, he has been taught that the social, political, and economic inequalities are the law of God. However, in secret Pedro Segundo is very proud of his literate, revolutionary son and preferred to see him as a fugitive than as one more of the peasants, planting potatoes and harvesting poverty like everybody else. When he heard other people humming the song about the hens and fox, he would smile at the thought that his son had made more converts with his subversive ballads than with the Socialist Party pamphlets he so tirelessly distributed (150).

In essence, Pedro Segundo represents that group of Chileans who have been indoctrinated all their lives with the belief that they are of lesser importance than the upper socioeconomic classes, yet have a glimpse of hope that such a revolution could possibly take place. Pedro Segundo and others like him doubt that an uprising will transform their own lives, but hope the consequences of such upheaval will benefit the lives of their children and future generations.

One day the old man Pedro García told Blanca and Pedro Tercero the story of the hens who joined forces to confront a fox who came into the chicken coop every night to steal eggs and eat the baby chicks. The hens decided they had had enough of the fox’s abuse. They waited for him in a group, and when he entered the chicken coop they blocked his path, surrounded him, and pecked him half to
death before he knew what had happened.
"And that fox escaped with his tail between his legs, with all the hens chasing after him," the old man finished.
Blanca laughed at the story and said it was impossible, because hens are born stupid and weak and foxes are born astute and strong, but Pedro Tercero did not laugh. He spent the whole evening absorbed in thought, ruminating on the story of the fox and the hens, and perhaps that was the night the boy began to become a man (121).

With the character of Pedro Tercero García, Allende presents a positive non-stereotypical role model whose example the struggling lower classes of Latin American can aspire to imitate. She draws upon a true historical figure to justify and bring realism to this character. Pedro Tercero attends school even though he must also complete the daily chores that are expected of him. He has an incredible desire and will to learn even in the face of adversity. Through this education and with the friendship of a socialist preacher who supports the doctrine of liberation theology, Pedro Tercero learns to question the system. He refuses to accept the way of life forced on the peasants and their treatment by the government and upper classes. He does not believe that this is the will of God and that it is the correct way because it has always been this way. Furthermore he does not keep his beliefs to himself; he begins to share these ideas with the other peasants on and outside Tres Marías. He instructs them through a medium that is easy for them to comprehend and that remains with them—using allegorical songs with memorable refrains. He teaches them the catchy tunes as he plays his guitar, such as the song of the hen and the fox. Esteban Trueba later cuts off several of the fingers on one of Pedro Tercero’s hands in retribution for his socialist teachings to the peasant farmers and for being Blanca’s lover and the father of her child. However, Pedro Tercero will again appear in the novel’s spotlight as he campaigns for the Socialist Candidate.
Tear down the fences! Tear them down!
The land is ours.
It belongs to you and them,
to Pedro, María

to Juan and Jose.

Victor Jara

The character of Pedro Tercero García is based upon the life of Victor Jara, a famous Chilean guitarist and singer in the 1960s and early 1970s. There are many similarities between the two. Victor was born to a peasant family and attended elementary school, university, and theater school. Victor Jara became a supporter of socialism and composed songs to spread the philosophy and draw the multitudes together for the cause. "In 1970, he actively participated in the electoral campaign for Socialist candidate, Salvador Allende" (Travniceck 15-my translation). During the military coup in September 1973, Jara was detained and taken to the national soccer stadium, Estadio Chile. It was here that Jara composed his last poem--"An Unfinished Song"—describing the horror of the people caught in the coup (Jara, An Unfinished Song 250). Three days later his hands would be mutilated as he knelt in the middle of the stadium. He would rise and lead thousands of prisoners in the bleachers in singing "the anthem of the Unidad Popular" before being shot dead along with many of those who joined him in song (qtd. in Lowenfels 80).

She had the beauty of early youth, although he could see that it would quickly fade, as it does with women who are born to have many children, work without rest, and bury their dead. Her name was Pancha García, and she was fifteen years old (Allende, La casa 50).

Pancha García, Pedro Segundo’s sister, is the matriarch of the illegitimate line of Esteban Trueba’s family. She is brutally raped at age fifteen by Esteban. Yet she does not even try to defend herself because "before her, her mother--and before her, her grandmother--had suffered the same animal fate" (51). She is then brought into the house to attend to the domestic duties
normally performed by a wife, but without the legitimate title that goes with the occupation. When she becomes pregnant, she is dismissed and banished from the house. Pancha is representative of another group in Chilean society—the peasant women. Because they are from a lesser class and female, they are abused in the above manner by many men from the bourgeoisie and even proletariat classes. The men have no fear that they will be reprised. Here one sees another chasm of society created; not only are the women and their children peasants, they now are outcasts in their own circles because they are considered illegitimate.

Alba did not see [Colonel] Esteban García again until he was standing next to her in the university parking lot, but she could never forget him. She told no one of that repulsive kiss or of the dreams that she had afterward, in which García appeared as a green beast that tried to strangle her with his paws and asphyxiate her by shoving a slimy tentacle down her throat. Remembering all that, Alba discovered that the nightmare had been crouched inside her all those years and that García was still the beast waiting for her in the shadows, ready to jump on top of her at any turn of life. She could not know it was a premonition (278-9).

Esteban García is the illegitimate son of Pancha García and Esteban Trueba. The only privilege he receives is the use of his father’s first name, yet this is more recognition than any of the many other illegitimate children on Tres Marías will receive from their father. Otherwise, even Esteban García is discharged and even forgotten by his father. He bears a son, (Esteban Trueba’s grandson), who will become Colonel Esteban García. The grandson perceives that he is not part of the family and watches as Alba receives all the economic and social advantages of being Esteban Trueba’s legitimate grandchild. He does not understand why there should be such differences between himself and her, and his hatred for the Trueba family festers until it eventually consumes his life. With Esteban Trueba’s help, Esteban García joins the police force. As a military colonel, he will later avenge himself against the Trueba family. During the military coup, he will capture, torture, and rape Alba to revenge his grandfather’s neglect and
lies. Colonel Esteban García represents those who have felt the abuse of others, yet cannot rise above their hatred for their abusers when put in a position of power, to help those of their own class. Their goal is not to help their class, but to seek revenge and replace their abusers with an even worse terror. Their hatred mixes with prejudice and vindictiveness to become the worst horror.

"Miguel explained that the election was a joke and that whoever won, it would make no difference because you would just be changing the needle on the same old syringe, and that you cannot make a revolution at the ballot box but only with the people's blood" (285).

Miguel and his sister, Amanda, become intimate friends of the Trueba family. These two personages are from the proletarian class. Their inclusion in the novel helps the reader to understand even a greater variety of socioeconomic and political views. Amanda and Miguel are orphans and Amanda assumes responsibility for raising Miguel. She becomes infatuated with Nicolás and becomes pregnant, but later falls in love with Jaime after he performs her abortion and looks after her at the Trueba house. She will later die defending her brother and his beliefs. Miguel witnesses Alba's birth, and the two later meet again at college and become lovers. He is a law student and a Communist guerilla leader "afire with the most uncontrollable passion: justice" (270). He believes in an extreme form of Marxism, claiming that justice cannot come by peaceful means as proposed by the Socialist candidate; it can only come about through violence. Miguel therefore represents not only the proletariat and a hard-line Communist view, but he also represents the great idealism and vitality found in some university students. It is apparent in history that university students in many countries have many times been the motivating factor for social and political change (such as recently witnessed in China). At the end of the novel, it is uncertain if Miguel is alive. It is ironic that Miguel's passion for justice becomes diluted with Colonel Esteban Garcia's passion for tyranny. Both goals become
secondary to the means (bloodshed) of achieving them. Alba’s unborn child reflects this dilution or inner mixing of ideas since either could be the father.

"Why did she have to live like this when she had more than enough money?" Esteban shouted. "Because she didn’t have anything else," Clara answered gently (131).

While Férua, Esteban Trueba’s sister, and Tránsito Soto, Esteban’s prostitute friend, are from two different worlds, they are both outcasts or marginal beings of society. Férua’s name "refers to a piece of cane often used to discipline school children. It also has overtones of fierro/hierro, meaning iron, branding iron, or iron weapon" (McCallister 24). She leads a repressed life, and she disciplines herself by making her life one of service to others: to a young Esteban, to their sick and aging mother, to Clara, and finally to the poor. Although she expects others to show self-restraint, she subjects herself to an unbending rod of discipline in every matter. Férua denies herself to help others not out of true love, but out of a perverted love. Allende uses the character of Férua to represent the epitome of those oppressed by human organizations and rules. Férua allows herself to be enslaved by patriarchal society and ecclesiastical dogma. She puts her family before herself when she chooses not to marry in order to care for Esteban and their mother. She lives in poverty herself so as to help the poor. Finally, she denies her inner urges toward Clara because they are against societal rules. She does not fight back in any manner, not because she does not desire to, but believing that if she obeys these public institutions, she will gain access to Heaven, above any earthly pleasure. Her beliefs are not only extreme for the average person of the period, they are the antithesis of those proposed by the Socialist doctrine of liberation theology which were taking hold in the same time period: that justice should be attained by the poor not only in Heaven, but also on earth. Férua "embodies those qualities so admirable in the lives of ancient saints yet so bizarrely masochistic in our own time" (24).
"And now, patrón, tell me what I can do for you," Tránisito Soto finally said, settling into the reclining seat of an airplane pilot while she toyed with the pearls around her neck. "I suppose you've come because you want me to repay the favor that I've owed you for half a century, right?" (Allende, La casa 355).

Tránisito Soto, on the other hand, is unlike Férula and all the other main women characters in the novel. Because she is a prostitute, she is automatically considered on the margins of society. However then, she is also beyond the influence of the patriarchal, religious, and societal institutions' rules which greatly affect the lives of the other characters in the novel; yet she is never out of contact with them. In fact, Tránisito creates a world where others can escape from the standards and expectations of their own world. In this new world Tránisito creates a "common ground of mutual dependence between the economic and sexual powers, and between men and women, that Allende finally locates as the site of interaction between Tránisito and the men, and on which Tránisito eventually builds her control" (Panjabi 13). In the end, Tránisito Soto is the only one capable of arranging Alba's release from the military regime. Tránisito Soto brings about a cooperative and egalitarian world in her brothel known as the Christopher Columbus: "the ironic reversal of history with Christopher Columbus not only revealing the potential for decolonization (and that too of women), but doing so in South America, and also the utopia of vision of equality" (11).

A fourth group of characters found in the novel are the professionals. They are identified throughout the novel only by their occupation and never by name. Allende includes these historical characters in her novel because their occupations and lives affected the entire Chilean country as well as other countries. This group consists of the dictator, the Candidate/President, and the Poet.
My granddaughter Alba, however, saw the true nature of the dictator long before I did. She picked him out from among all the generals and military men. She recognized him right away, because she had inherited Clara's intuition. He's a crude, simple-looking man of few words, like a peasant. He seemed very modest, and few could have guessed that one day they would see him wrapped in an emperor's cape with his arms raised to hush the crowds that had been trucked in to acclaim him.... (Allende, La casa 320).

The dictator is described and appears in the chapter entitled "The Terror" which describes the coup d'état and the subsequent atrocities (311). Although the dictator is never named, those familiar with Chilean history recognize him by the description and by the actions of his people to be Augusto Pinochet. Pinochet was a Chilean general and became commander of the army in 1973. He led the right-wing military coup secretly supported by the U.S. that deposed Salvador Allende in that year. "His efforts to suppress dissent led to massive civil rights violations" in the following years of his administration (Webster 763).

Allende stressed the importance of the "moment of history the writer is born into," especially in Latin America, a world of great "struggles and defeats, brutality and magic." Increasingly aware of the New World's five-hundred-year tradition of violence, she matured intellectually with her uncle's socialist movement and became a novelist at her reactionary grandfather's death. Thus, her book is the celebration of a momentous social struggle in which those two figures were principals (Earle 555).

Another historical character identified only by his profession in the novel is at first known as the Candidate and later as the President. His description, Socialist beliefs, and all the events surrounding him in the novel are based on Chile's Socialist President from 1970 to 1973, Salvador Allende. Salvador Allende was "the first socialist Marxist president ever to be elected by a democratic free election" and was overthrown in a bloody military coup (Allende, Interviews with Latin American Writers 9). He was also Isabel Allende's paternal uncle. Since her father had left the family, Salvador Allende financed Isabel's and her two brother's education, bought them clothes, and paid for their vacations (Coddou, "Para Leer" 127). Isabel
Allende’s life has been greatly affected by the death of her uncle as is evidenced by her writing and her exile from the country.

"Every time I felt the need to recover my country, I read Neruda because he is Chile, he is the voice of Chile. It is a beautiful metaphor that he died following the military coup. With his death, the voice of the people and the voice of freedom grew silent" (Allende in Interviews with Latin American Writers 9).

There is one character identified only by his profession that appears throughout the novel: the Poet. The novel even begins with an epigraph (which will prove to be very meaningful in the novel) by distinguished poet and Nobel Laureate Pablo Neruda.

Pablo Neruda was the most frequently discussed Latin American poet of his time…. [He] remains the indisputable master of twentieth-century Spanish, as well as Spanish-American poetry. His international reputation continues to swell, going far beyond Hispanic boundaries, he is a major poet to reckon with in any language. Near the end of his life, Neruda’s poetic genius, apparent to readers everywhere, was recognized by Nobel judges as they awarded him the prize for literature in 1971 (Schade 1001).

Neruda was a Communist party supporter from 1945 until his death and wrote many verses on the themes of justice and freedom (1005). His death ironically occurred within days of the military overthrow of the democratically-elected Socialist government.

The Poet is mentioned ten times in the novel and each moment coincides with Neruda’s life at that point in time (Castillo de Berchenko 52-3). For example, one of the first instances in which the Poet is mentioned, occurs early in his career (as evidenced by his title in small characters) as Clara declaims "the beautiful verses of a young poet she had taken under her wing--a poet who was beginning to be talked about everywhere" (Allende, La casa 123). In a subsequent chapter, Neruda is identified again as Jaime reads "the love sonnets of the Poet, who was by now a world-renowned figure, as Clara had predicted the first time she heard him recite in his telluric voice at one of her literary soirées" (201). Next, the novel discusses those that
attended Clara's spiritual meetings, "among them was the Poet--years later considered the greatest of the century and translated into all the known languages on earth" (239). In the final mention of this historic character, the people brave the machine guns of the new military regime as they line the streets for his funeral procession and shout his name and then scream "'Here! Now and forever!' The Poet's funeral had turned into the symbolic burial of freedom" (329).

The historical significance of the characters in Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus* is further enhanced "by the use of names that add depth to the characters through their allusions and secondary meanings" (McCallister 21). The names chosen for the oligarchy are clearly aristocratic while those of the peasants are common names. Names are repeated in the female Trueba-del Valle lineage and the García male lineage to emphasize the notion of historical recurrence. Many of the names are descriptive of the characters' personalities. For example, Clara signifies clairvoyance while Férula personifies discipline. The name Pedro possesses a Biblical connotation connected with the strong disciple Peter. These are only a few examples of these allusions and secondary meanings which greatly enhance the reader's interpretation of each character.

Although Allende's *La casa de los espíritus* is a fictional novel, she adeptly uses characters and events (both fictional and historical) to bring to life a broad spectrum of Chilean history and society. A time line follows from Elena Reina's article entitled "La historia: aparecida en *La casa de los espíritus* Isabel Allende. Un caso de imaginación dialógica." It provides the reader a broad orientation of the time period covered in the novel in relation to important events in the Trueba-del Valle family.
Relationship between history and the vital space of the personages:

1914-1918  
World War I  
Trueba reconstructs Tres Marías; Rosa's death.

1920-1924  
Elections (Alessandri - a Liberal, elected President)  
Trueba constructs the house on the square; marriage with Clara.

1939-1945  
World War II and earthquake (Chile)  
Trueba reconstructs Tres Marías for Clara and Blanca.

1946  
Presidential elections (González Videla - a radical)  
Trueba initiates his political career; elected Senator;  
Clara constructs her labyrinth in the house on the square.

1954  
Clara's death and decadence of the house on the square.

1970  
(Allende), elected first Marxist President (in Latin America)  
Decadence of Tres Marías by the tenant farmers.

1973  
Fascist military coup  
Trueba destroys Tres Marías in his rage against the tenant farmers.

1974-1975  
Victims of the military coup  
Trueba considers reconstructing Tres Marías;  
Trueba and Alba reconstruct the house on the square (Reina 401).

The fictional narrative mirrors historical events in Chilean history. In the first ten chapters of the novel, these events mostly appear in the background and so may at first elude the reader. Yet in the last chapters of the novel, the historical setting and events come to the foreground, and the novel becomes a political allegory of Chilean history in the early 1970s portrayed through both the historical characters such as Pedro Tercero, the Poet, the Candidate/President, and the dictator, and the fictional characters who are representative of segments of Chilean society.

Aside from Chilean history, the reader is exposed to many wide-reaching historical events as well as broad historical relationships and political philosophies. Concrete historical events alluded to in early chapters include World Wars I and II and the concentration camps, women's suffrage, the great earthquake, the Socialist Candidate's political campaign train ride, and man's first walk on the moon. The reader encounters relationships between the classes and genders, as well as interpersonal, religious, and societal relationships, as s/he become entwined in the characters' lives and the events that surround them. For example, Esteban, representative of the
oligarchy, expresses his patriarchal views early in the novel toward the peasants as children who need to be cared for, and the women who belong at home in charge of feminine things. The reader is also exposed to the different political philosophies that were a part of Chilean history during this period: liberalism, conservatism, liberation theology, socialism, communism, and finally, militarism.

"With a stroke of the pen the military changed world history, erasing every incident, ideology, and historical figure of which the regime disapproved" (Allende, La casa 325).

In the final chapters events become uniquely Chilean, yet in many respects also broadly representative of much of Latin America and the underdeveloped world. The characters move about in a political allegory of Chilean history in the early 1970s. The Socialist Candidate (Salvador Allende) is democratically elected (290) in November 1970 and as a consequence, internal and external forces conspire to sabotage the Marxist government through "economic destabilization" (291). Land is expropriated under the agrarian reform program touching off internal opposition toward the new government. This dissent is further fueled by resistance to nationalization of some industries and a food shortage. The destabilization of the Chilean economy and government is supported with the help of some "gringos" (312). The question of intervention by U.S. CIA and some U.S. businesses with interests in Chile brought about probes into the subject and much condemning evidence (Sobel 116-121). The following is only one of the many conclusions drawn on the matter:

In his evidence to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on January 22, 1975, former director of the CIA Richard Helms admitted that he had misled Congress in his earlier evidence claiming that the CIA was not involved in politics against Popular Unity. Helms went on to claim that "I know that the Nixon administration wanted it overthrown, but there was no way to do it that anybody knew of, and any probes that were made in Chile to ascertain whether there was army force that was likely to bring this about produced no evidence that there was any such force."
This may have been true in 1971, but by October of 1972 there had emerged both a civilian and military group determined to defeat Popular Unity. The emergence and organization of such a group was helped both directly and indirectly by the United States. But the emergence and organization of this group was primarily a response to the development of the internal class struggle in Chile and not a response to the machinations of North American groups. The United States assisted the making of the Chilean coup, but was not the prime promoter of that coup (O'Brien 241).

Finally, the military coup d'etat begins with the navy revolt on September 11, 1973 (Allende, La casa 312). The President (Salvador Allende) addresses the nation via radio (312), a farewell very similar to that in real life (Varas 51-53). The Presidential Palace (the Moneda Palace) (Allende, La casa 314) is bombed, and the President is killed, although the official version claims that he has committed suicide (317). A dictator (Augusto Pinochet) with an "august mustache" would emerge and the terror would begin (320). There are prisoners, disappearances, murders, torture, and wide-spread hunger and unemployment (323). The outside world would respond to these massive human rights violations over a year later: "On November 7, 1974, the United Nations Human Rights Commission condemned by 90 votes to 8 with 26 abstentions the Chilean junta for its gross violations of human rights" (O'Brien 285). Extreme censorship would soon become the rule in media, books, and conversation (Allende, La casa 325). And the Poet's (Pablo Neruda) funeral on September 25, 1971 would become a "symbolic burial of freedom" in the Chilean nation (329).

"The reality of the present [is] a kaleidoscope of jumbled mirrors where everything and anything can happen" (Allende, La casa 72).

Allende's view of history is characterized by two Borgesian motifs: the mirror and the labyrinth. The mirror introduces the theme of "the Other," a mirror image. Often there is a discrepancy between empirical reality and individual perception. The Socialist ideology suggests that history commences with a thesis (an action or thought) which elicits an antithesis (the
opposite action or thought), and then the two merge in a synthesis (a mixture of the two). Chile, like all Latin American countries is a mixture of many elements. Chile is a melting pot of races, cultures, and religions. The synthesis of these elements may be for the best, but often is not perceived as such. This confrontation of "the Other" is apparent in Allende’s novel. Magical or fictional events are used in conjunction with historical events to portray the story. The heart (intuition) and the head (facts) often come into conflict throughout the novel. The narrators represent both masculine and feminine points of view, and they present the text through both the spoken and written word. Machismo is compared to sexual equality. Traumatic events many times occur simultaneously with positive events, such as the death of Clara’s parents and the birth of Blanca. Two brothers, Jaime and Nicolás, are mirror images of one another in their looks and their personalities. Esteban Trueba fathers a legitimate and an illegitimate bloodline. The urban house and the rural farm create a parallelism between the lives of the upper and lower classes. Political philosophies such as socialism and militarism (military-backed dictatorship) are contrasted with one another. It truly is a novel where "the reality of the present [is] a kaleidoscope of jumbled mirrors where everything and anything [can] happen" (72).

The novel is a magic trunk where everything fits: poetry, essays, testimonies, fantasies, documentaries, everything! Through it we can give a fictional order to chaos and find the key to the labyrinth of history. A novel is like a window open to an infinite landscape where the written word records memories which cannot be blown by the wind (Allende, Interviews with Latin American Writers 16).

The labyrinth suggests the theme of chaos versus order; in fact, the labyrinth may be perceived as either chaotic order or ordered chaos. This term is used repeatedly in the novel to describe the house on the square. Esteban creates a very orderly house that Clara transforms into chaos as she adds rooms here and there and makes other convoluted modifications to its structure. The labyrinthine house later shelters and hides many people from the ruling chaos of
the order--first, Esteban and later, the military. This motif is also used, for example, to describe the government bureaucracy (Allende, La casa 139), the hospital clinic where Amanda has her abortion (205), and the Christopher Columbus (267). This association may suggest that certain political, religious, and societal organizations are unnatural and cause much chaos in the lives of many: "The institutionalized powers [wish] to 'redeem' the world from evil and bring order out of chaos by stamping out all subversive action…" (Martínez 293).

The novel itself is also a labyrinth as are the notebooks on which it is based. Alba writes the novel using Clara's notebooks which are "divided according to events and not in chronological order" (Allende, La casa 368). Other examples are created through the narration, as it alternates between Esteban and the omniscient speaker, and through the background settings of the farm and the house. The ambiguity regarding what is magical or real, fictional or historical also confuses the reader as if s/he were in a labyrinth. The present, past, and future are combined as the novel begins in what appears to be the present, but what turns out to be the past at the conclusion of the novel. As Alba tries to order events of the novel, she compares the task to assembling a jigsaw puzzle in which each piece had a specific place. Before I put the puzzle together, it all seemed incomprehensible to me, but I was sure that if I ever managed to complete it, the separate parts would each have meaning and the whole would be harmonious. Each piece has a reason for being the way it is, even Colonel García (367).

History is ordered chaos. History appears to be the chronological order of events, systematically explaining the way things happened in the past, but to those who lived through it, it was not order but chaos. Because Clara is perplexed by the unaccountable events of her life, she does not arrange her notebooks chronologically. However, she finds comfort in describing the chaos: "That's why...Clara wrote in her notebooks, in order to see things in their true dimension and to defy her own poor memory" (367). History is not as ordered as it appears
in text books, but is a compilation of chaotic events. *La casa de los espíritus* juxtaposes the chaotic events in Chile during this time period and the orderly views of Esteban and history. For example, the political party, Popular Unity, organizes because it does not believe in the order created by the political powers of the period. The chaos Popular Unity creates becomes a source of hope and survival to those who concur with its philosophy as they contemplate a new and different order in their lives. Clara's chaotic house is also a source of hope and survival for many diverse people, from the parapsychologists to the persecuted. Events as they occur in the present seem fragmentary, chaotic and irrational until time has passed and one is able in the future to look back, and then hopefully receive some understanding. The jigsaw puzzle pieces that Alba speaks of represent individual chaotic lives and events. As the puzzle is put together, one better understands the individual pieces by viewing their origins and interrelationships. It is in seeing the completed jigsaw puzzle that Alba is able to understand individual chaotic pieces such as the hatred that Esteban García harbors for her and her family. This is a new view of history, realizing that only in the future can the occurrence and results of chaotic events of the present be understood or ordered. Similarly, it is only through this knowledge of the past that the characters of the present are understood. It is in the ordering of the chaotic pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, that Alba and Allende are finally able to make some sense of this chaotic period in Chile and "reclaim the past and overcome terrors" of their own (368).

*How much does a man live, after all?*
*Does he live a thousand days, or one only?*
*For a week, or for several centuries?*
*How long does a man spend dying?*
*What does it mean to say "for ever"?*
*(Pablo Neruda qtd. in preface of Allende, La casa).*

This epigraph taken from Neruda announces the central issue of time in *La casa de los*
espiritus. There is a great deal of repetition of events and names in the novel which suggests a circular structure of history. The following are only a sample of the repetition and are by no means exhaustible. The novel begins and ends with the same phrase "Barrabás came to us by sea" (Allende, La casa 3, 368). Furthermore, the beginning and ending paragraphs have the same content only in reversed order; in the beginning one finds phrases concerning:

A: arrival of Barrabás
B: delicate calligraphy
C: reclaim the past and overcome terror of my own

yet, they are found in the reverse order in the final paragraph of the novel: C, B, A (Hernán-Gómez 337-8). There is the repetition of the theme of silence, the creating of strange animals in different medias, and the importance of the written word and the keeping of notebooks. Esteban Trueba (upper class) rapes Pancha García (lower class) and cuts off Pedro Tercero García’s fingers. These violations are avenged by Esteban García (lower class) as he rapes and cuts fingers from Alba Trueba-del Valle (upper class). The circular structure is reinforced by the use of the name Esteban and his violations (345). However, there is violence not only in the family, but in the nation. The violence described by Father Restrepo in his sermon in the first chapter of the novel anticipates the torture Alba and others will face under the military regime toward the end of the novel (Reina 397). Further reinforcement of the circular structure occurs with the repetition of names: Nívea, Clara, Blanca, and Alba (which are practically synonymous); and Pedro García, Pedro Segundo García, and Pedro Tercero García. There are also many inherited traits among the Trueba-del Valle women including a close link between mother and daughter throughout life and beginning in the womb (Hernán-Gómez 345).

For all the evidence pointing to the circular scheme of time and history in the book, it is important to understand that breaking this pattern must be voluntary. It is necessary to learn
from the past as Alba explains:

It would be very difficult for me to avenge all those who should be avenged, because my revenge would be just another part of the same inexorable rite. I have to break that terrible chain. I want to think that my task is life and that my mission is not to prolong hatred... (Allende, La casa 368).

It is impossible to alter the past or the future; only the present is still mutable. "Thus, [Alba's] avowed intention to write the novel in order to 'reclaim the past' (368) may be viewed here as her resolve to reinterpret history from the vantage point of an enlightened present" (Martínez 289).

Yet what is time after all but a human postulate, a systematic arrangement of moments. Time has different meanings—when living in chaos, each moment seems as if it will last forever yet in retrospect, a lifetime seems fleeting and inconsequential. Are the concepts of a past, present, and future mere illusions that in fact coexist simultaneously, as Alba speculates? What is crucial is that each individual bear in mind that "the space of a single life is brief, passing so quickly that we never get a chance to see the relationship between events; we cannot gauge the consequences of our acts" (Allende, La casa 367). Allende does not propose a simple solution for living, but rather she provides readers the groundwork upon which to construct "the foundations of what we build" (Foreman 385).

It would be very difficult for me to avenge all those who should be avenged, because my revenge would be just another part of the same inexorable rite. I have to break that terrible chain. I want to think that my task is life and that my mission is not to prolong hatred but simply to fill these pages while I wait for Miguel, while I bury my grandfather, whose body lies beside me in this room, while I wait for better times to come, while I carry this child in my womb, the daughter of so many rapes or perhaps of Miguel, but above all, my own daughter (Allende, La casa 368).

La casa de los espíritus houses many spirits. The very word spirit acquires different meanings throughout the novel. The reader is first introduced to the spirits of Clara's magical
world—the parapsychologists and the Mora sisters. Then there is Clara herself. She ministers to others and dares to point out the injustice of her world, and though Esteban dominates her body, he fails to subjugate her angelic spirit. When Alba is in solitary confinement and longs to die to escape physical and mental torture, Clara’s spirit comes to her "with the novel idea that the point was not to die, since death came anyway, but to survive, which would be a miracle" (351). Alba then assumes the spirit of a survivor and is beyond the power of Esteban García (352). Many women in the prison and concentration camp come to her aid, as does a poverty-stricken woman in shanty town where she is released. Alba admires the courage and fellow-feeling of these women: "I told her she had run an enormous risk rescuing me, and she smiled. It was then I understood that the days of Colonel García and all those like him are numbered, because they have not been able to destroy the spirit of these women" (365).

The spirit appears as a ghost, an intuition, an inspiration, the will to survive, saintliness, charity toward others, and the memory of another. It is all of these. Allende’s novel is a call to all women and men to awaken the long-dormant and internal source of power and to participate in its unfolding. Allende suggest that it is only by aligning themselves with ‘spirit’...that human beings may recover their wholeness...and interrelatedness that celebrates cooperation rather than competition, and deliverance rather than repression (Martínez 302).

[Clara] suggested that [Alba] write a testimony that might one day call attention to the terrible secret she was living through, so that the world would know about this horror that was taking place parallel to the peaceful existence of those who did not want to know, who could afford the illusion of a normal life, and of those who could deny that they were on a raft adrift in a sea of sorrow, ignoring, despite all evidence, that only blocks away from their happy world were others, these others who live or die on the dark side (Allende, La casa 351-2).

Isabel Allende’s La casa de los espíritus transcends fiction. It is history from an original point of view. It is a testimony to her personal history as well as to the Chilean spirit of the twentieth century. The novel has universal implications because the people, relationships, and
events it describes also pertain to other underdeveloped countries. Yet the message of this novel is directed not only to Chileans and the citizens of other developing countries; it is a summons to the rest of the world. Allende compels her readers to pose the question: Are we not ethically bound to challenge existing oppression and relegate it to the pages of fiction? Allende blends fiction and reality in *La casa de los espíritus*; hence, her novel "entertains and instructs at the same time that [it] continually reminds us of our moral obligations as human beings" (Levine 28). The novel begins and ends at the same point in time, yet the reader has now witnessed the intervening circumstances. It is a call to action addressed to the spirit of each reader who must rewrite history for Alba's unborn child and other future generations.

"A book is the work of two people: the writer and the reader. So every book is really several books, and each reader is a witness to the reality the author suggests" (Allende, *Interviews with Latin American Writers* 16).

by Kathy Ratzer Evetts


Coddou, Marcelo. "La casa de los espíritus y la historia." Literatura Chilena: Creación y Crítica. 13(1-4 [47-50]): 89-100.


