

2015

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Recommended Citation

Thomson, Emily (2015) "Not to Die, but to Survive": The Construction of Female Voice in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*," *The Pegasus Review: UCF Undergraduate Research Journal (URJ)*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/urj/vol8/iss1/4>

“Not to Die, but to Survive”: The Construction of Female Voice in Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*

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ABSTRACT: Isabel Allende’s debut novel *The House of the Spirits* follows three generations of a Chilean family, focusing primarily on the lives of the grandmother, daughter, and granddaughter. Living under a controlling patriarch and an oppressive government, these women strive to reclaim and maintain their identities in a world that denies and rejects their agency and experiences. This literary critical essay discusses the means through which Allende’s characters, and Allende herself, create their own narratives: silence, speech, and writing. Through extensive close reading and analysis of Allende’s text, I examine the individual and combined narratives constructed by these methods, and how the characters and author move within patriarchal limitations. I also discuss the evolution of the characters’ perceptions of their personal narrative within their familial narrative, and their familial narrative within the grand narrative of time. By both subverting and writing back against traditional patriarchal narratives regarding women’s lives, Allende’s characters utilize the power of words through speech and writing to construct portrayals of themselves and their experiences with their own voices.

KEYWORDS: latina literature, latin american literature, literary critique, feminist critique

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ESSAY

In Isabel Allende's novel *The House of the Spirits*, the female characters take center stage, framing and constructing the narratives of their lives in direct opposition to patriarchal silencing tactics. Using her own family history as a base, Allende details the lives of the Trueba family living in an unnamed Chile in the mid-20th century, following in particular three generations of women: Clara, her daughter Blanca, and her granddaughter Alba (Allende, "About Isabel"). Allende envisions a heavily patriarchal society in which men exert their control over women through rape, physical and verbal abuse, and the imposition of limitations on verbal communication. As a result, the women of this novel must navigate their society through their own unique means. In order to disrupt the hold that their patriarchal society maintains on speech, Allende's three main female characters rely on alternative modes of communication, such as the use of deliberate silence, writing and journaling, art, and spiritual powers, including clairvoyance. While these methods are granted to the characters in order to prevent them from speaking, the characters and Allende herself use these alternative modes to create their own spaces free of patriarchal restriction.

Clara, over the course of her life, subverts the typical patriarchal narrative of submissive silence, instead finding strength within the power of silence. For instance, Clara chooses to remain silent for nine years after the death of her older sister Rosa, a choice she makes after witnessing her sister's autopsy. This traumatic experience fills her with "the silence of the entire world" (Allende 39). The death of her sister hurts Clara deeply, but while she recovers from it with time, she still does not utilize her voice. She subsequently chooses to stay silent simply because "she did not feel like speaking," rather than being physically or emotionally incapable of speaking (73). Indeed, Clara becomes increasingly content during this time period, and with the support and love of her family, she becomes "so happy that she felt no need to speak" (82). Though initially her muteness resulted from trauma, similar to the silence forced upon numerous traumatized women who have no outlet for their pain, Clara subverts this state of affairs by choosing to remain silent even in happiness, finding inner clarity in her decision and gaining strength within her own spirit.

Clara also chooses to be silent when she needs to once again find that inner sense of peace during her difficult second pregnancy. She utilizes that silence to "leave

behind the discomfort...and deep fatigue" the pregnancy caused, and instead communicates via writing (113). Her husband Esteban Trueba describes her voluntary muteness as her "last refuge," her final resort when life's pain and difficulties grew too much for her to bear. Choosing not to speak allows Clara to keep a firm hold on her inner self, helping her to survive trials that would have otherwise overtaken her.

Later, she uses this "last refuge" against Esteban himself. When Esteban goes into a fit of rage after he discovers his daughter Blanca has taken a peasant for a lover, Clara reminds him that he, in his youth, raped multiple peasant women. Enraged, Esteban strikes her, and when she recovers from the blow, Clara never speaks to him again. Esteban spent many years attempting to own Clara's heart and soul, wanting to "possess her absolutely," but to his eternal frustration, he could "never make her [his]" (177). After the incident, Esteban feels that "something in his life [has] been destroyed forever," and though he tries to cajole Clara into speaking to him again, he is never able to do so. She enacts this decision precisely because Clara knows that her silence hurts Esteban more than her words ever could. Sara E. Cooper's "Family Systems and National Subversion in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*" states that Clara chooses this strategy "because she already has discovered the uselessness of her words"; furthermore, she posits that Clara's silence "paradoxically mirrors society's cowed silence in the face of systematic rape and repression of women and the lower classes" while simultaneously forming "a site of resistance to the oppression" (29). Clara subverts the typical narrative of men silencing women by choosing to be silent of her own accord—Esteban struck her to silence the truths she voiced, so when he desires to hear her voice again, she withholds it from him.

The power that is gained from this silence lies in her choice itself. Many women have no choice but to remain voiceless, but Clara, who cannot divorce Esteban legally, subsequently gives up her voice of her own accord, knowing that Esteban longs to hear her speak again, but only on his own terms. That she deliberately chooses to negate herself from Esteban's life is also noted by Ronie-Richele García-Johnson, who states in her article "The Struggle for Space: Feminism and Freedom in *The House of the Spirits*" that Clara "swore not to enter masculine verbal space" (189). Masculine verbal space, an area in which male voices dominate and female voices are modulated by men for male consumption, is illustrated through Esteban's desire to control and own Clara

through her words. Clara, when the need to enter this masculine space and communicate with her husband arises, circumnavigates said space by having her sons, who have taken after their mother far more than their father, act as go-betweens for herself and Esteban in the years afterward, and so she maintains her own personal control of the verbal space between herself and Esteban. In this way, Clara psychologically and physically separates herself from Esteban and his patriarchal values. Esteban is the prime patriarch of the family, and Clara's refusal to engage within his oppressive verbal space represents her rejection of the patriarchal narrative of the silenced woman by turning it on its head.

Ruth Y. Jenkins also reads Clara's silence as a deliberate response to patriarchal oppression, declaring in her article "Authorizing Female Voice and Experience: Ghosts and Spirits in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Allende's *The House of the Spirits*" that Allende "reinscribe[s] female silence as subversive alternatives" through Clara's voluntary muteness (64). Again, silence within a woman's narrative generally results from oppression, but here it is reframed. Esteban has previously shown he yearns for control over the women in his life, such as when he exiles his own sister, Ferula, from his house when he becomes jealous of her closeness with Clara. Clara knew then that there was "no point in asking any questions" or making any arguments regarding this exile (Allende 137). Later, when Esteban forces his daughter Blanca to marry against her will, Clara protests by refusing to attend the wedding party, until Esteban persuades her to attend for Blanca's sake. Throughout their marriage, Esteban makes it clear that he will hear no arguments from Clara regarding his decisions.

As a result, Clara knows that she cannot directly speak out against her husband's actions, even his violence, understanding that his behavior is condoned by and in line with society—he has, for example, abused and raped the women of Tres Marías in the past, but as the *patrón* of the area, he never experiences any legal opposition or societal condemnation for his actions. Esteban's treatment of his wife and child will warrant no repercussions, so Clara, rather than speaking against him, chooses to punish him directly through her silence. This active silence subverts both "patriarchal social and literary scripts," as it is a result of her own choice rather than Esteban's (Jenkins 64). Rather than arguing with Esteban in a space where he holds the most power, Clara creates her own space under her total control.

During her silences, Clara turns to the one realm in which she can fully control her voice: writing. As a young girl Clara begins to record the details of her life in notebooks, and she continues to keep these notebooks, supplemented by letters written to and from her daughter Blanca, until she dies. In her silent periods, she uses a slate to communicate, writing notes to her family—but never, in her last silence, to Esteban; instead, as stated above, she uses her children as messengers, thereby refusing to grant him access to her aural voice. Through writing, she is able to construct the narrative of her life by her own hand. Historically, the narratives of women have been primarily authored or altered by men, if they were even published at all, but Clara retains full control of her notebooks, and later transfers that control to her granddaughter Alba. Jenkins sees these narratives as attempts to "record stories of female experience neither sufficiently nor authentically articulated by histories constructed from patriarchal perspectives" (67). Through her writing, Clara constructs a narrative that authentically recounts the experiences she, her daughter, and her granddaughter endure, free of patriarchal alterations. Clara serves as an example to the audience—like Clara, readers also have the ability to construct their own personal narratives, and deny outside forces the option of altering their lived experiences.

The final realm in which Clara transcends the interferences of patriarchy is that of the spirits. Clara's clairvoyant abilities allow her to foresee the future, communicate with the dead, and later, even visit her granddaughter after Clara's own death. This clairvoyance is coded as explicitly feminine throughout the novel; Esteban Trueba does not consider it a subject suitable for men, and he repeatedly admonishes his son, Nicolás, for attempting to acquire his mother's skills. Despite his efforts, Nicolás is never able to communicate with the spiritual world as Clara can, and so that world remains accessible only to the women of the novel.

Blanca, Clara's daughter, lacks her mother's clairvoyance, but mirrors her mother's habitual writing through her letters to her Clara, which they exchange whenever she and Clara are apart. During particularly busy times in Clara's life, Blanca's letters replace the notebooks as a form of record-keeping. However, while her mother and daughter express their emotions through writing, Blanca instead primarily gives shape to her voice through the visual arts. When she and her lover, Pedro Tercero, finally consummate their relationship, Blanca is unable to tell anyone of her experience. Instead, she channels

her feelings into “insipid watercolors”; the meaning of these paintings confuses Clara until she discovers her daughter’s romantic relationship (Allende 157). As an extension of this interest in visual arts, Clara convinces Blanca to work with her hands during periods of sadness or illness in order to busy herself, and so Blanca finds her true creative passion: clay pottery. Old Pedro García, the grandfather of Pedro Tercero, teaches Blanca to shape clay into cookery (173). Growing bored with this kind of output, Blanca creates a vast array of human and animal figures out of clay, expanding into the world of the imaginary with fantastical hybrid creatures.

This hobby later becomes “her only means of survival, as well as her sole comfort in the sad hours to come” (173). After her father discovers Blanca’s relationship with Pedro Tercero, Esteban forces her to marry the Frenchman Jean de Satigny, who repeatedly attempts to co-opt her creations, suggesting she sell them under the guise of authentic Native art. Another symbol of the patriarchal force of society, de Satigny wants to alter Blanca’s work instead of presenting it authentically. Blanca refuses, knowing her creations lack any real connection to Native art, and later separates herself from de Satigny in order to protect her daughter Alba from his perversity, just as her mother Clara separated herself from Esteban Trueba after his treatment of Blanca. Historically, Clara, Blanca, and Alba’s stories and artistic creations would be ignored or altered in order to conform to dominant patriarchal narratives, but as the women construct their narratives without the interference of men, they create a uniquely and authentically female story.

Just as Blanca uses creative acts to express herself, she also, like her mother, uses silence. After her honeymoon she lives a “secluded, melancholy life” in which she rarely interacts with others, even her husband (251). Despite her lack of clairvoyance and inclination toward the physical rather than the spiritual, she easily establishes a similar method of communication with her unborn daughter during her pregnancy; like Clara, she creates “a whole system for communicating with the infant that was growing inside her,” speaking to the unborn Alba in a “silent, uninterrupted dialogue” (251). She also struggles against patriarchal pressures to speak as men dictate her to: she refuses to tell her father the name of her lover when he discovers her affair and she then later decides to never again utter the name of her husband, Jean de Satigny, after she leaves him and returns to her mother’s house. Clara, who “knows the advantages of silence,” does not push the issue or question Blanca’s reasons for

leaving, acknowledging that Blanca’s decision to refrain from speaking of de Satigny is her way of processing that era in her life and pressing forward (265).

While Blanca lacks her mother’s spiritual powers, Alba appears to inherit a version of Clara’s precognitive skills, and later, her ability to speak to spirits. Alba meets Esteban García, the illegitimate grandson of Esteban Trueba, twice as a child, during which he assaults her both times out of jealousy towards her legitimate status and his desire to exert control over others due to a lack of control over his own life. After these incidents, Alba has nightmares involving García as a “green beast” that tried to suffocate her “by shoving a slimy tentacle down her throat”; the narration notes that, unbeknownst to Alba, these nightmares are a “premonition” of future events (328). This shared power reinforces the connection Alba and Clara experience, the connection that makes Clara the strongest presence in Alba’s life.

In addition to power over the narrative she has created and some of her spiritual powers, Clara also passes on to Alba the concept of writing to preserve one’s sense of self. During the unrest of a military dictatorship, Esteban García, now an officer of the military police, captures and interrogates Alba. He tortures her for information on the whereabouts of her boyfriend Miguel, a revolutionary, and Alba reacts as Clara did before her, refusing to speak. García’s actions are a direct result of Esteban Trueba’s own sense of entitlement towards the bodies of women, a hallmark of patriarchy, as he is the grandson of a woman whom Trueba raped. Alba cannot physically separate herself from García as Clara did from Trueba, but her silence is her attempt to reject him psychologically. García continues to torture her, raping her repeatedly before throwing her in the “doghouse,” a sealed cell with no light.

In the doghouse, Alba begins to lose all sense of time and space, and waits for death to come to her. Instead, the spirit of Clara visits her, and convinces her that “the point” of life is “not to die, since death came anyway, but to survive” (Allende 414). This frames Clara’s previous written texts as similar to her use of silence—both are mechanisms with which one can survive the inevitable pain of life. Alba later notes that Clara may have created her notebooks not only for herself, but for Alba and others, as Clara had the ability to see into the future and would have known that Alba would need them, and would one day compile them for others to read. The narration repeatedly describes the notebooks as “bearing

witness to life,” that is, the lives of this family, and the truths of life in a broader sense. If Alba’s supposition holds true, then the use of writing for survival is twofold: the notebooks not only allow Clara to survive; they also propagate the survival of her granddaughter and her family’s story. Clara foresees her own role in her family’s cycle of history and thus works within that cycle to help her family even after she has died.

Peter G. Earle’s “Literature of Survival: Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*” posits that Clara urges Alba to write “not only to forestall madness by keeping her mind occupied, but to preserve a testimony,” and that this method of survival is the “true heart of literature” (551). No one but Alba can construct her particular narrative and record her life as she has lived it; her experiences are hers alone, and only she has the power to preserve them faithfully, thereby allowing her to present her experiences as a testimony of her life. This testimony not only encompasses Alba’s life, but also the lives of other people as viewed by her—her unique perspective is key. As James Mandrell sums up in his essay “The Prophetic Voice in Garro, Morante, and Allende,” Alba subsequently “saves herself by writing” in her mind while imprisoned until she grows strong enough to “free herself from the power of her torturer,” successfully distracting herself from her own misery long enough that she survives to see her release from the doghouse (241). During her remaining time in the doghouse, Alba mentally composes her story, and while the sheer immensity of the events she has experienced initially stymies her, she successfully creates a code with which she can remember her life. Her silence becomes a refuge in which she regains her strength through the power of her stories created by her own voice; she is able to “bury herself so deeply in her story” that she “[overcomes] all her varied agonies,” just as her grandmother Clara had during her own life (Allende 414).

Alba further uses writing as a tool for survival when she escapes the doghouse and enters a concentration camp for women. The women in the camp remain strong in the face of their imprisonment, singing and refusing to follow the orders of the male guards, instead focusing on taking care of each other (427). Alba is given a notebook by her fellow prisoner and old acquaintance, Ana Díaz, who had previously assisted Alba in recuperating from numerous violent encounters while incarcerated. Ana Díaz encourages Alba to write, so that Alba can “get out whatever’s worrying [her] inside, so [she’ll] get better once and for all” (426). Yet again, other women

encourage Alba to write as a means of survival. Ana Díaz knows that writing holds Alba’s only means of salvation in a world that will try to silence her voice and deny her experiences. Writing allows Alba to render her chaotic inner landscape into a manageable narrative form over which she alone holds control, enabling her to recover and regain her mental and emotional stability.

After her rescue from her imprisonment by Tránsito Soto, a sex worker who owed Esteban Trueba a favor, Alba sets out to write this narrative physically as her grandmother did. Ironically, Esteban himself is the one who proposes the project as a way for Alba to retain her identity should circumstances force her to leave the country in the future, saying that with the record, she’ll “be able to take [her] roots with [her]” (430). The threat of losing Alba, the last of his relatives, served as such a shock to Esteban that he loses the controlling nature he had exhibited for so long. His suggestion that Alba record the lives of herself, her mother, and her grandmother is not a command directed by a patriarchal force, but merely a suggestion, and one that comes from a concern for Alba’s sense of identity and mental well-being.

Alba subsequently takes control of the project, allowing her grandfather to assist, but never letting his voice or viewpoint overshadow those of herself and her mothers. Nevertheless, Doris Meyer, in her article “Parenting the Text: Female Creativity and Dialogic Relationships in Isabel Allende’s *House of the Spirits*,” deems Esteban’s voice “essential” to the narrative, believing that his interludes represent the traditionally male-centric version of history (361). She emphasizes that his voice is essential because it exists in a place of secondary importance to the voice of Alba, who narrates the entire novel; Esteban’s position as the “no longer dominant” voice inherently reflects that Alba’s voice is “no longer muted” by patriarchal influences (361). Yet Esteban’s secondary voice does not overpower Alba’s, but bolsters it, and has a presence in the narrative only because of Alba’s decision to grant it space, rather than the male granting the female space. As with Clara’s silence, the power of this decision lies in the ability to turn the typical patriarchal narrative on its head.

The entire novel thus presents itself as the rewriting of the del Valle/Trueba family’s narrative as reconstructed by Alba with the help of Clara’s notebooks. Esteban Trueba contributes to this effort with a handful of chapters narrating his view of events, but his voice does not overpower the women’s voices; on the contrary, Alba’s power over the narrative constrains him, mirroring the

constraint that women's narratives have endured at the hands of men. In his tangents, he even comments that Alba would perceive things differently; his experience of rebuilding his property at the hacienda of Tres Marías, for example, is that the hacienda always had better conditions when he ruled as the *patrón*. Therefore, as his experiences inform his writing, he cannot alter his story to "go along with [his] granddaughter's story about class struggle" (Allende 51). Trueba is unable to see past his own experience because he never had the empathy that would allow him to consider someone else's viewpoint, being himself a product and symbol of patriarchal society.

Alba, on the other hand, does have empathy, and with it she allows her grandfather to present his own version of events. That Alba possesses power in arranging this narrative, rather than Trueba, is a subversion of the traditional patriarchal narrative. As Deborah Cohn states in her article "To See or Not to See: Invisibility, Clairvoyance, and Re-Visions of History in *Invisible Man* and *La Casa de los Espíritus*," Alba's writing "dialogues" with Trueba's and "restores what has been excised" from Trueba's version of events because her writing attempts to shatter "the ideological blinders of those who refuse to see," exemplified by Trueba himself (388). She grants her grandfather a voice within the narrative, but makes sure to frame that voice with the truth of her experiences and those of her foremothers, which Trueba rejected throughout his life as patriarchy rejects the stories of women throughout history.

Alba rewrites the contents of her grandmother's notebooks with one foot placed firmly in the present, making constant references to future events even as she narrates happenings in the past. This echoes the clairvoyant powers that Clara possessed, and while Alba has only limited experience with these powers, both women view history and the future as being almost simultaneous. The personal narratives of Clara, Blanca, and Alba meld into the story of one family so that the audience can see the cycles that may not be obvious if Allende presented each life without the context of the others. Susan R. Frick, in her article "Memory and Retelling: The Role of Women in *La Casa de los Espíritus*," notes that Alba's task enables her to "reclaim the past as her own": through recording not only her past, but also the pasts of her mother and grandmother, Alba reclaims the time that patriarchal forces attempted to wrest from her, as well as acknowledge the effects the lives of her foremothers had on her own life (29). Just as Alba only gets the idea to write from her foremothers, Alba's life

and story is not possible without the lives and stories of her mothers, and Frick notes that in Clara's notebooks, Blanca's letters, and Alba's manuscript, "each life-text inherits unmistakable qualities from its predecessors" and yet also "builds on past experience to make progress" (33).

Alba states that although she sometimes feels as if she had already written the words she sets down, she knows that it was Clara who did the writing; still, she cannot help but feel that perhaps "everything happens simultaneously" and that one can only see things "in their true dimension" when one considers the past, present, and future all at once (Allende 432). In this way, Alba reclaims Clara's voice as her own, melding their voices so that their shared and individual experiences echo and mirror each other. Indeed, the narrative ends as it begins, with the line "Barrabás came to us by sea," causing the weight of the book's entire narrative to impress itself upon the reader in the same way that the weight of Clara and Blanca's lives impress themselves upon Alba's.

Despite this emphasis on the simultaneous nature of experience, Alba subverts this notion of circular history in one very notable way: Alba's act of recreating herself and her family's history ultimately convinces her to break the chain of hatred that caused the tragedies within that history. She states that she has "[come] to understand" the causes and effects of the choices made during the lives of her family members as she "pieces things together from...the many documents" she has used (432). She goes on to say that she finally understands that she has to "break that terrible chain," as enacting any revenge for the injustices done upon her would only bring about more despair in the future (432). P. Gabrielle Foreman, in her article "Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and Allende on Call," refers to this process as Alba becoming "the site of a history which survives, and so nurtures the present" (370). Alba literally becomes the site of that history when she internalizes her stories during her time in the doghouse, and she creates an externalized version of that history through her manuscript.

By processing and reconstructing her family's story and fully understanding how and why events occurred, Alba learns from the mistakes made in the past and strives to create a better future for her daughter, who is potentially a product of patriarchal oppression via Esteban García's rape. She considers her task to be "life" rather than revenge, saying that her "mission is not to prolong hatred

but simply to fill these pages” that honor the past and inform the future (Allende 432). Clara’s writing enables her to survive the difficulties of her life, but Alba is able to surpass the sole act of survival. Alba’s writing enables her to not only survive, but also to transform and thrive, providing her with the resources with which to escape from the seemingly constant cycle of hatred and oppression and work towards a brighter future for those who will come after her.

Through Alba, the voices of Clara and Blanca—voices that would have otherwise been forgotten or ignored—are heard, and Alba creates a narrative that encompasses the lives of her entire family, using her agency to bring their experiences to light. The narrative that she and her foremothers create is one that writes back against the traditional patriarchal narratives surrounding women and their voices. Ultimately, Allende illustrates the ability of women to take advantage of the limited channels of communication that patriarchal forces allow them—writing, art, and silence—by altering those channels to suit their own needs and desires. The restrictions placed on Clara, Blanca, and Alba are subverted and redirected to create a narrative entirely controlled by female voices and experiences. Similarly, Allende herself constructs a narrative with the goal of establishing a feminine voice that is granted the agency typically denied to female voices by the dominating patriarchal discourse, creating a space in which female narratives are both fully realized and, most importantly, accessible to future generations.

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