

The House of Spirits: Survival through Memory

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Isabel Allende's novel *The House of the Spirits* tells the history of one family's struggles and survival, despite horrible atrocities, through the lives of three generations of women. Beaten down, Alba evokes the spirits to help her die, but her grandmother's ghost brings her the saving idea of writing. With the help of her grandmother's notebooks that bear witness to life and her dying grandfather, Alba writes her story that begins many years before she is born when her grandmother was a small child. Alba acts as a messenger for the voices and stories of her family so they are not forgotten. While unearthing the true dimensions of her family history, Alba learns to accept her past as fate and sees her future hopeful. Allende uses magical realism to show the importance of remembering the past as a means for survival.

Alba is the main narrator, with the help of her grandfather, but through her writing a polyvocal patchwork of each family member is heard. This helps Alba understand her own actions and reasons for the decisions she chose. She finds herself as a political prisoner lying raped, bloody, hungry, and alone on a cold cement floor awaiting death. Clara, Alba's grandmother, comes from beyond the grave to comfort Alba and gives her strength and courage by telling her "that the point was not to die, since death came anyway, but to survive, which would be a miracle"(414). Alba hears her grandmother's wisdom that gives her hope, but it is her grandfather's connection that saves her from destruction. With only her and her grandfather left, he poses the idea that they together write the story of their family. Alba begins a long,

mysterious, romantic, and imaginative journey, marked by events and not time, while she waits for her lover with her bastard child in her womb.

The opening and ending line in the novel, "Barrabas came to us by sea" evokes a mystical world in which *The House of the Spirits* takes place. The magic of Clara and Uncle Marcus' legends is looked upon as ordinary occurrences, but the simplicity of Clara, Blanca (Alba's mother), and Alba's optimism carried throughout the novel is the true mystery. All three women endure what is to be thought as sad and tragic lives; Clara marries out of duty, Blanca is kept from the only man she loves, and Alba is raped and beaten. In spite of that, each lives a life filled with strength, unconditional love, and wisdom far beyond this world. Clara represents the spiritual world where myth, legend, and the supernatural flourish with acceptance. Alba comes from the present world where she is occupied by her country's current political upheavals. Blanca acts as a link between juxtaposing worlds: daughter of a clairvoyant and mother of a revolutionist.

The perception of time is an important theme throughout the novel, which helps Alba overcome her terrors. Alba writes how her grandmother wrote her notebooks by "events and not in chronological order"(433). This helps Alba realize the relationship between cause and effect and the fate one has once a path is chosen. With her spirit raped by Esteban Garcia, her grandfather's illegitimate grandson (but not destroyed) Alba invites death. It is her knowledge and memory of the past that saves her from the hands of death. She remembers that Esteban Garcia is a product of her own grandfather's rapes and how his wrath set a "chain of events that had to complete itself"(431). She realizes that her rapist is doing this because her fate has already been set and it is beyond her control. Alba learns to accept that "nothing that happens is fortuitous, that it all corresponds to a fate laid down before [her] birth, and that Esteban Garcia is

part of the design. He is a crude, twisted line, but no brushstroke is in vain"(431). Alba's spiritual survival comes from her awareness and undoubting faith of the mysticism in the world.

Despite the tragedy Alba experiences she writes, "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 better times to come"(432). She does not question why these horrible acts have happened to her or fills her heart with hatred, but accepts her life for what it is. Alba could not have achieved this wisdom without her grandfather and her grandmother's notebooks. She writes, "That's why my Grandmother Clara wrote in her notebooks, in order to see things in their true dimension and to defy her own poor memory"(432). The world is much larger than one person's perception, and Alba discovers a magical place through her grandmother's words. Alba escapes Esteban Garcia's hatred through a mystic journey into a land where time is circular and not linear. Isabel Allende uses magical realism to relate time with events and memory with redemption.

Sarah Prevot is a Political Science major. Dr. James Walter was her English professor.

Dr. Walters's Comments: *Sarah's careful observation of narrative detail and construction feeds her vary intuitive grasp of interconnections among episodes that relate the complex life of a family extending over several generations.*