House of the Spirits: Themes of Connection and Interconnection

Isabel Allende, the author of The *House of the Spirits*, wrote the novel after fleeing her own country, Chile, after a military coup much like the one she describes, and much of the action in the book is connected to her personal experiences and the larger history of Chile. The novel is a narrative of connection, both structurally and thematically: the primary narrator, Alba, continually connects the events in the story to their causes and effects, and presents her own family, the Truebas, as a microcosm of the society as a whole. The actions of the Trueba family have consequences not only in the personal realm, but in the political and cosmic realms as well, showing the ways in which these realms are interconnected, in the past, present, and future, among the dead, the living, and the yet-to-be-born.

Allende uses the technique of "magic realism" to show her themes of interconnectedness. P. Gabrielle Foreman writes that "magic realism, unlike the fantastic or the surreal, presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected." Magic realism, then, implies that the magical and the real are implicated in and reflected in each other. A massive earthquake hits the country just as Clara discovers her daughter Blanca's illicit affair with Pedro Tercero, and all of Esteban's bones are broken as a result, suggesting that the earthquake is a cosmic reflection of the cataclysmic nature of the love between Blanca and Pedro Tercero. But magic, Allende implies, has its limits: when Férula is banished from the Trueba house, Clara tries to locate her with her magic powers but concludes that "you can't find someone who doesn't want to be found." Though Allende is often compared to the Colombian writer Gabriel García Marquez, as Foreman writes, "Allende inverts his technique—the stronger the historical moments, the more distant the magical—as if to counter the threat of history becoming 'merely' enchanted and so subsumed." Instead, Allende, through her narrator Alba, shows that the relationships among the characters determine both the private and public events of the story.

The relationships in and among the Trueba family are a microcosm of the larger society: Esteban Trueba's rape of Pancha García is a reflection of the exploitation of the peasant classes by the upper classes, and their grandson Esteban García's rape of Alba reflects the rage of the poor towards the privileged. Alba recognizes that the two rapes are interconnected and vows at the end of the story to break the chain of evil which has afflicted her family and her country. She also offers other, more hopeful examples of relations between the exploited and the privileged when she writes of her parents' long and loving affair and her own relationship with Miguel, suggesting, as Norma Helsper writes, "the superior resilience of love in comparison to hate." Helsper notes that while Allende portrays the traditional family as a "respectable facade that hides the truth of rape, adultery, battering and domination," by the end of the novel "Alba has begun to forge a new model family which will include Chileans of all social classes and political tendencies." Alba is able to forge her new, interconnected family after a visit from her grandmother, Clara, who magically appears to her when she has begun to await her own death:

> She stayed like this for a long time. When she had nearly achieved her goal, her Grandmother Clara, whom she had invoked so many times to help her die, appeared with the novel idea that the point was not to die, since death came anyway, but to survive, which would be a miracle. With her white linen dress, her winter gloves, her sweet toothless smile, and the mischievous gleam in her hazel eyes, she looked exactly as she had when Alba was a child. Clara also brought the saving idea of writing in her mind, without paper or pencil, to keep her thoughts occupied and to escape the doghouse and live. She suggested that she 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 there were others, these others who live or die on the dark side.

Here, Allende connects magic with creativity. Rather than having the capacity to alter historical and personal events, magic instead is the means through which we can survive them. Even at her most alone, in solitary confinement and close to death, Alba is connected with the spirits, who in turn connect her with her own spirit, the magical creativity within her. In this scene, the dead care for the living, so that the living may in turn care for the yet-to-be-born. Moreover, Clara suggests that Alba write her story to connect with others who do not realize their connection to the suffering of those "on the dark side," and in spite of being able to live in denial about these connections, because of the suffering of others are themselves "adrift on a sea of sorrow" without knowing it. As Z. Nelly Martinez notes, "Allende suggests that it is only by aligning themselves with 'spirit,' 'magic,' or 'Eros,' that human beings may recover their wholeness and thereby recover the wholeness which is, in fact, the world—an interrelatedness that celebrates cooperation rather than competition, and deliverance rather than repression." Allende stresses that aligning oneself with magic is a choice; because of their interconnectedness, the female characters enable one another in making this choice. As Nora Glickman writes, "Nívea's stories are imprinted in Clara's journals. Blanca's letters mold Alba's character, the latter's life testimony reaches the reader in episodic segments that Alba announces, elaborates, orders and revises to offer that reader the most sensible way to rescue the past." The sharing of writing and stories among the various generations of females symbolizes their shared spirit, which enables them, as Clara enables her granddaughter, to endure.

By contrast, throughout the story, Esteban Trueba has disavowed or destroyed his connections with others. His need to possess Clara only further distances her, and his refusal to acknowledge his illegitimate offspring leads to the rage of Esteban García, which nearly destroys the person he loves most. Esteban fails to see the consequences of his support for the destruction of the popularly-elected regime, his destruction of the tenant village at Tres Marías, and his unwillingness to accept Pedro Tercero. As Richard McCallister writes, "His rape of Pancha García is revenged by Esteban García's rape of Alba, his early support for the overthrow of democracy is revisited in his political impotence under the military regime. Indeed, his acts of usurpation in the name of establishing a patriarchal lineage work precisely to prevent it from happening," which is shown most clearly in Esteban's initial support for the coup which leads to the death of his son Jaime. It is only when Esteban sees the impact his actions have had on others that he can find an inner peace which has always eluded him, and as Martinez writes, "to symbolize [Esteban's] redemptive awareness, Allende makes him assist in the telling of the story, done by the narrator, Alba, who most adequately fulfills the role of artist in the novel." Thus, the interconnected narratives of Alba and Esteban are interspersed throughout the novel such that the structure reflects the overlapping themes of interconnectedness. Moreover, Esteban's redemption is symbolized by his use of his own magical creativity, which occurs not only through his recognition of the harm he has done to others but by his alignment with Clara's gentle spirit, an alignment which is symbolized by his gradual shrinking to Clara's height.

As Martinez writes, Allende's novel ends with Alba's recognition that "the past, existing only as memory and hence open to transformation, loses its grip over the present as well as its power to effectively predetermine the future." In vowing to love her unborn daughter as she has been loved, even though that daughter may be the result of a rape, Alba vows to transform the future. As Helsper notes, Allende "proposes the family as a model for her divided country: members of this family have oppressed, wounded, and tortured each other, but they are the same ones who must now heal one another. The family she posits is all of Chile." In connecting the political, personal, and cosmic realms of her narrative, Allende offers Alba's spirit as a reflection of the spirit of all her fellow citizens and as a witness to us as readers of our own interconnectedness.

Source: Jane Elizabeth Dougherty, in an essay for Novels for Students , Gale, 1999.