

# The house of the spirits and the sorrow of war essay example

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Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* is a narrative that is the tale of a single family spanning several generations in Latin America. Nao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War* tells the story of Kien, a soldier for North Vietnam during the Vietnam War, in a nonlinear, scattershot way. Various events are told outside of their timeline, to a point where the narrative becomes more thematic than linear. Both of these books carry many thematic similarities, and yet their differences in story, tone and character bring new notions to light about how these stories are told.

As previously mentioned, both stories have a very unconventional narrative - *House of the Spirits* takes a genealogical approach to exploring the events of a family, while *Sorrow of War* details a man's life in an abstract way which ignores linear time. Allende's work shows the various things that happen to each new woman in the del Valle family, from lost love to rape and abuse and political intrigue. Each new woman in the family has a name that is synonymous with 'white' or 'clear,' showing a strange connectivity between each of the woman. This helps to extend the protagonist role to each woman as a single entity; the persecution of the del Valle woman is portrayed as a constant throughout time.

In *Sorrow of War*, Ninh shows Kien's life and his experiences in the Vietnam War as he feels necessary; the book alternates between various flashbacks of his life as a soldier and his developing relationship with Phuong, showcasing his story not as it happened, but as Kien remembers it. This demonstrates an immediacy that just tracks Kien's train of thought, instead of showing how Kien got from point A to point B. This gives the book a

somewhat dreamlike, hallucinatory factor, as the narrative drifts along from point to point not really understanding what the overall goal may be until the end. Kien simply wants to get his story down, and by showing us how he thinks of his life and in what order, the audience learns how Kien's mind works. Kien's guilt at his knack for surviving terrible situations, as well as how he misses Phuong, is a large part of his character.

One thread that connects both stories is the use of writing as a framing device - in *House of the Spirits*, the narrators, including Alba and Estaban, use Clara's journals to write about the story that is being told. Meanwhile, *Sorrow of War* is told through the novel written by Kien about his experiences in the Vietnam War and elsewhere. The notion of the novel in Ninh's work is evidenced by the presence of a new narrator talking about how he found Kien's book at the end of the work; he denotes the intense and powerful nature of the book, noting that it needed to be published.

The fact that both works are largely presented as the writings of the characters is significant; it places the prose directly in the heads of the characters themselves, with every word becoming monologue. Thus, there is no omniscient narrator, leaving the events of the books somewhat subjective. This allows the reader to hear in greater detail just how the things that happen in the story directly affect the narrator; Kien is worn down by his experiences with war and loss, while Clara and her descendants are broken down and uplifted by their relationships with their families. The purposes of the writing of these stories is also made clear; Kien hopes to bring closure to his life of horrors by writing down and completing his life

story, while Alba hopes to extrapolate Clara's diaries to continue her legacy and have something to do while her child is born.

Both books feature characters with a knack for survival and longevity - Allende's Clara and Hinh's Kien. In the case of Clara, she is a clairvoyant, someone with strange mystical powers, who lives longer than a normal person would - this allows her to personally witness many of the events in the story. As the entire story takes place mostly along her lifespan, from a little girl into an old woman, she remains a fixture throughout all four generations of the book. Clara's sense of survival comes mostly from her propensity for prophecies and making strange predictions that often come true. Even after she dies, she lives on in spirit form, which is seen by Estaban at the end of the book, thus remaining a substantial presence in the lives of her family.

At the same time, Kien has a much darker, more guilt-ridden ability to survive. As a soldier in the Vietnam War, he has a tendency to be the sole survivor of attacks levied against his troops. He considers it luck, but this leads to him having tremendous guilt at always being the one to survive, whilst everyone else around him is killed. This showcases just how futile war is; no matter what happens, everything will still just stay the same, and no fewer people will die. The experiences Kien has in wartime shape his mind deeply as he attempts to escape this life of conflict; however, it just ends up leaving him cold and desperate inside. Linking back to House of the Spirits' emphasis on family, Kien attempts to burn his finished book, like his father burned his paintings. The overall theme of the book is that the horrors of war

can often leave the pleasures of life cold; he could not enjoy things as he used to and he was left numb to feeling.

Like Sorrow of War, the military is also a significant presence in House of the Spirits as well; Estaban, near the end of the book, attempts to overthrow the socialist government through military action. However, the military gets out of hand and starts to become murderous, killing many who still support the government instead of it becoming a peaceful occupation. This demonstrates the sheer power and terror of the military that can be wielded against a civilian population, particularly as Alba is captured and raped by Col. Garcia. Kien experiences this as well, on the other side of the coin, through the many experiences he has with Vietnamese civilians as a member of the military. Harshly critical of the military experience, Kien also hates the communist propaganda that is levied against the people, all of which merely deny the youth of Vietnam from enjoying the fruits of life and love. Fear of the military is what keeps the Vietnamese people docile and wounded, something which breaks Kien down as well.

Civilization is often shown to be the bane of an honest person's existence in both works as well. House of the Spirits showcases the upper class characters, like the Garcias, as reckless, foolish and despicable in their actions. The del Valles, however, are somewhat virtuous and evenhanded, as well as forward-thinking and hopeful. Meanwhile, Kien learns from a coffee plantation owner that the overall goal in life is to be happy, unlike the position of the communist government, which stresses that life and war

should be dedicated to the service of the government and its control over the people.

In conclusion, *The House of Spirits* and *The Sorrow of War* use concepts of family, war, survival and more to tell the stories of people whose lives are broken by abuse. The use of character-driven accounts in the book (Clara's diaries, Kien's novel) demonstrates an emphasis on bringing the reader into the world of the character and relating their feelings to the reader's experiences. This helps to make the characters more sympathetic and immediate, and allows their cathartic experiences to be shared by those who read about them. Allende uses the book to deal with grief and death, as Esteban passes happily into the next life. Hinh's book addresses the protagonists' obsession with the death and destruction that happens to everyone around him, leading to his own emotional death, the death of his soul and sense of innocence.

## **Works Cited**

Allende, Isabel. *The House of the Spirits*. Bantam Books, 1982.

Hinh, Bao. *Sorrow of War*. 1994.