

The anti-universal human experience: the house of the spirits



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Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* is a whirlwind of color, sound, and magic, set in the midst of Chile's 1970 socialist revolution. Although the novel paints a lucid portrait of Chile in tragedy, I would like to focus on the conclusively transcultural and transhistorical aspects of the novel; more so, on how Allende herself concentrated on the idea of the foundation of humanity along with its quests and experiences, rather than the periodical facets of the novel. Allende focuses greatly on the universal themes of predetermined or free fate, the role of the mind in reality, and the power of testimony. However, I believe Allende herself, in the presentation of these themes, actually seeks to defy the misconception of a universal human experience, for every human story and reality is different. Ultimately, through the magical and fantastical aspects that well define her novel, Allende reveals the colorful cacophony that is our universe in tandem with our minds, and why the two make for a universal human experience to be unattainable.

Allende unites humanity under the human endeavor of questioning. Questioning is the universal motion and pandemonium of the human pursuit to discover one's place in our macrocosm. The novel spends its story searching for the truth of one's place in the universe, but the reader is unaware of it until the Epilogue. Alba eventually reflects on her role in her own fate, finding what is ultimately true; that every person and event is one link in a perpetual chain of history and future, and that "nothing that happens is fortuitous, that it all corresponds to a fate laid down before... birth" (Allende 431). She came to the realization that every event "{adds} another link to the chain of events that {has} to complete itself" (Allende

431), and although her fate was, perhaps, written in the stars, she declares at the conclusion of the novel, “ I have to break this terrible chain” (Allende 432). The eternal struggle, as it may be, is deciding between two realities- that of a fixed and unyielding fate, or that of a free, malleable one. What I believe is universal is the choice between the two. Man’s awareness of his own mortality may also compliment this idea of the decision between free will or determined fate. Humankind is plagued with a lifelong confrontation with the nature of mortality, and I feel that Allende sought to express that the true struggle of mankind is the settlement of whether or not to succumb to a predetermined mortality. She applauds the courage to defy the idea of predestined fate; as Clara’s spirit came to Alba in the doghouse, she “ appeared with the novel idea that the point was not to die, since death came anyway, but to survive, which would be a miracle” (Allende 414). The reality of one’s life experience is determined by the way one answers the questions of life and fate. The human venture to answer these questions is universal, but the answers and outcomes are not. Alba discovers herself that humankind is caught in “ an unending tale of sorrow, blood, and love” (Allende 432), and that she wants to be the one to break the cycle for herself.

The House of the Spirits is effectively transcultural and transhistorical through its ultimate focus on individual human realities, rather than a single universal one. The novel does a remarkable job of exploring the idea of individual and moldable realities through its focus on the magical and sublime. In fact, Allende immersed nearly all of her characters in an enchanting and ethereal environment where “ divine good humor and the

hidden forces of nature acted with impunity to provoke a state of emergency and upheaval in the laws of physics and logic" (Allende, pg 267); in other words, the line between possible and impossible was abolished completely. The magic was not meant to be from another world, for "magic realism is not 'the creation of imaginary beings of worlds, but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances'" (Milne). In this case, I believe man's circumstances to be the reality he has constructed for himself. Ultimately, Allende seeks to prove that what is magic for one is another's reality. For little Alba, "who was completely ignorant of the boundary between the human and the divine, the possible and the impossible" (Allende 301), the levitating chairs and the spirits that roamed the halls of the Big White House on the Corner were reality. The novel therefore explored deeply the idea that reality and consciousness are much more malleable and versatile than we believe we know. Although it is a rarity to find incidents concerning the ever present supernatural or a piano that plays Chopin by itself, the fantastical and magical facets of the novel were to illustrate the vastness of individual reality. *The House of the Spirits* encourages the ubiquitous idea of truth that is not universally alike, but equally as different in every person.

The novel did not paint a picture of the universal human experience. Allende was, in fact, seeking to prove that there is no such thing. In *The House of the Spirits*, a reality or truth of a single human experience is a facade, because the idea of a single truth is a deceptive concept, and it must be cast aside. The fantastical aspects of the novel worked to show just how chaotic and lawless are the elements that make up human consciousness. The truth, if

one can call it so, is that reality and truth itself are subjective. Blanca Trueba, having fleeing the “evil kingdom of the Incas” (Allende 261) and Jean de Satigny, seemed to simply erase the Count from all past, present, and future, telling Alba that “her father was a distinguished and intelligent aristocrat who had unfortunately succumbed to fever in the northern desert” (Allende 265), inventing a new reality that would be Alba’s for many years. The novel seeks to express that there are infinite truths, because truth is a construct, and human experience and life is dependent on one’s respective reality. Therefore, a single human experience would be deceit.

One’s human experience (the life one has on mortal Earth) is different from all others and must be shared to contribute to the ever extending human mosaic of life in history and future. As is learned in *The House of the Spirits*, human testimony must be shared to exist and must be shared to alter the chain of time, because every link of every life is validated through story and testimony. This theme is overpoweringly transhistorical- in the context of nearly every majorly calamitous conflict of humankind, human testimony has bore its witness.

The idea of bearing witness to life is the most interesting from the novel. The Trueba saga teaches that one must bear their own witness to their own life. Due to the fact that all people’s realities and physical life experiences are different, one must illustrate their realities; otherwise, they cease to exist. It is possible to deny history, for history is remembrance, and it has happened before. The reason Clara suggested to Alba that, while in the very core of an excruciating and brutal hell, she should write her testimony, was so that she “might one day call attention to the terrible secret she was living through, <https://assignbuster.com/the-anti-universal-human-experience-the-house-of-the-spirits/>

so that the world would know about {the} horror that was taking place parallel to the peaceful existence of those who did not want to know... and of those who could deny that they were on a raft adrift in a sea of sorrow, ignoring... that only blocks away from their happy world there were others” (Allende 414). Single events are isolated and floating in a sea of time, and testimony chains them to the line of history. The present is composed of the past, and history is what creates humanity’s sense of its own humanity. The novel profoundly proves about the universal human experience is not there is a single one, but that each one must be shared.

Although Allende did succeed in unifying humanity universally under an umbrella of questioning and answering, what I believe she triumphed in illustrating vividly was the idea that the human experience is not defined by any one element, for the human experience is a melangerie of color and chaos, varying across all mankind. The House of the Spirits is ultimately transcultural because at its core, it explores the ethereal and celestial makeup of the human body and spirit. Thus, the lives and times of Allende’s characters may be considered transhistorical as well, for she has proved that reality is subjective to a specific mind. The Three Mora Sisters are said to have “{seen} the spirits of all eras mingled in space” (Allende 432), because the celestial and physical foundation of a person has no root in any specific culture, time, or place. Allende showed the versatility of the reality of one’s human experience through her presentations of the powers of the mind in the determination of one’s fate and reality. At humanity’s core, the bases of soul and body are the same. Allende has proved that the reality that one constructs is what makes the human experience disparate universally.