



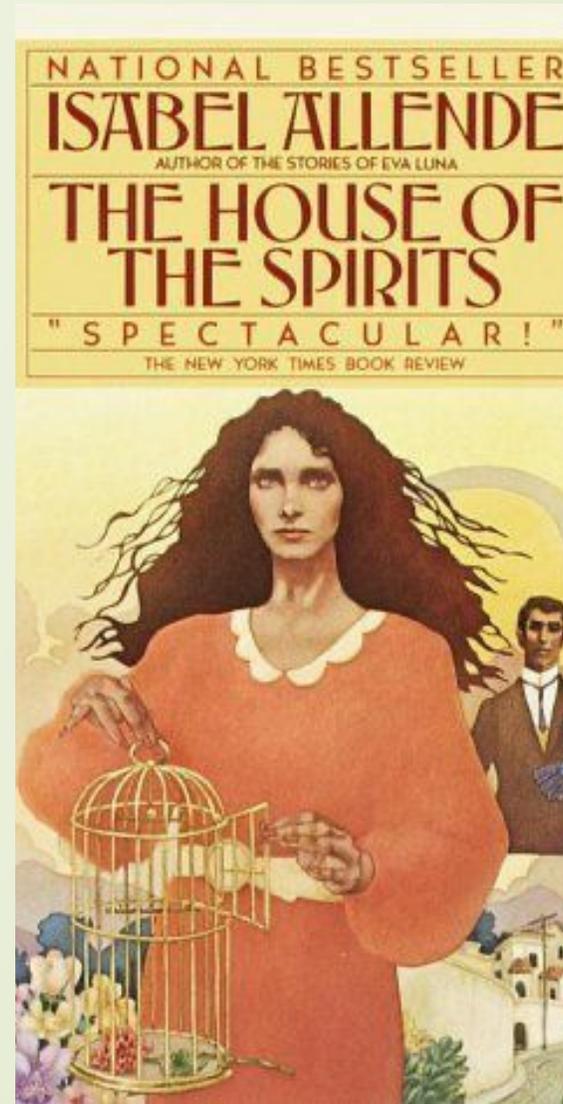
Silence and Subversion in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits*

Humanities 196

Clara Jimenez

Who is Clara Del Valle?

- Youngest child in Del Valle family
- Born with clairvoyant and telekinetic powers
- Distinguishes herself by being interested in “magic”
- Main question(s): how does Clara employ silence throughout her life as a defense mechanism? How does she perform different forms of labor to defy the oppressive and abusive patriarchy enforced by her husband in their domestic space? In what ways does Clara’s performance of labor intersect with the introduction of democratic concepts in her otherwise authoritarian environment?





Space, testimony, and silence

- Women in the novel “epitomize women at various phases of Chilean social and political history” and Clara represents a more “personal statement of liberty” (García-Johnson, 184).
- The home represents the female body, dominated by men
 - Clara defies this by finding freedom through “spatial maneuvers... [existing], spiritually, in another space or dimension” as a child and as an adult (García-Johnson, 185).
- “Survivors who do not tell their story become victims of a distorted memory” (Laub, 78).
 - A major theme is Clara’s dedication to writing down her life’s story
 - I argue that this can be tied back to Laub’s concept that “testimony is, therefore, the process by which the narrator (the survivor) reclaims his position as a witness” (Laub, 85)



Clara, clairvoyance, mental space

- “Clara announced that there would soon be another death in the Del Valle family. “But it will be by mistake” (Allende, 25).
 - Clara often predicts family tragedies
 - Establishes an independent mental space in childhood
- “Clara had no interest in domestic matters...she was as distracted and smiling in bed as she was in everything else, relaxed and simple, but absent” (Allende, 129).
 - Rejection of typical domestic role
 - Reality established to escape the control of her husband within the home



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Clara and labor



- “She was not impressed by the brick houses, the school, and the abundant food, because her ability to see what was invisible immediately detected the workers’ resentment, fear, and distrust” (Allende, 105).
 - Emotional labor supersedes physical/literal labor
- “Clara divided her time between the sewing workshop, the general store, and the school, where she established her headquarters for treating mange and love...even teaching the children to sing” (Allende, 105).
 - Disinterest in domestic scene subverted
 - Clara engages emotional and psychical labor give indigenous population a voice where they otherwise have none



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Clara and silence



- “She believed that just as the power of her mind could move the saltcellar on the table, she could also produce deaths, earthquakes, and other, even worse catastrophes” (Allende, 37).
 - Clairvoyance leads to childhood fear
 - Silence acts as a defense mechanism
- “He lost control and struck her in the face...Clara fell to the floor without a sound... Clara never spoke to her husband again. She stopped using her married name and removed the fine gold wedding ring that he had placed on her finger” (Allende, 201).
 - Clara's husband forces her into soundlessness through violence
 - Silence is weaponized in adulthood



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