

**PROMPT:** Analyze the influence of culture, geography, political **OR** religious climate on the a) theme b) genre **OR** c) reception of Isabel Allende's *House of Spirits*

### Defiance

Never in history have people solved problems by doing nothing. Humans, endowed with the power to think, to speak, and to act have brought corrupt forces down to the ground and have built better lives out of them, but doing so began with recognizing discontent and realizing something needed to be done. Defiance has been the ultimate helper of mankind, and Isabel Allende witnessed the application of it in Chile, her native country. In "The House of the Spirits", Allende uses Magical Realism to show the effectiveness of defiance in achieving justice from oppression, echoing actions in Chile stemming from the cultural restrictions of religion, rigid social classes, and the belief in spirits.

In the novel, a character's reaction to the strictness of the Church correlates to the Chilean people's actions against 20th-century Chile's restrictive, dominating religion of Roman Catholicism. Though Father Restrepo's influence keeps every church worshipper in order, Clara acts out, unbelievably weakening his authority despite being a child. Unique to Magical Realism, Clara uses profanity out of the ordinary, and "Severo understood that he must act before collective laughter broke out around them or some divine cataclysm occurred"(7). Severo's concerns of "laughter" indicate that the worshippers could be amused by Clara's outburst, giving them an excuse to escape from the anxiety caused by the priest. However, as implied by his fears of a "divine cataclysm", Severo's fear of the priest's power in ruining his reputation overpowers his motivation to question authority. Clara's outburst shatters that authority by inviting laughter and ridicule. She has resisted the

oppression that Severo and all the other worshippers won't question at all. In the 20th century, the Chilean Church actually did control of many aspects of society, but the people diminished that power as well. As reported by the Berkeley Center, the Church influenced Chilean daily life since the 16th century (Berkeley Center, "Chile"), and Kwintessential, a travel translator site, says that "Abortion is actually illegal due to the influence of the Church ... Divorce was illegal until 2004" ("Chile - Language, Culture, Customs and Etiquette"). However, throughout Augusto Pinochet's regime, a constitution that denoted the freedom of worship caused a loss of influence for the Church (Berkeley Center, "Chile"). The religious freedom has shifted power significantly, because the Church could no longer affect as many people. The setting in "The House of the Spirits" matches actual Chilean history, and in both cases, the people's actions have curbed the Church's authority. Through writing about Clara's defiant outburst in church, Allende demonstrates a decrease in the Church's power that is also evident in Chilean culture.

Clara's bold reactions towards her premonitions echoes the Chilean people's challenging of their culture's rigid social structure. In the novel, Clara foresees that she will marry Esteban Trueba, but she does not show fear or unhappiness. When Esteban Trueba arrives at the del Valle's home looking for a suitable wife of his class, Clara "greeted him with a strong handshake that showed no trace of shyness. 'I was expecting you,' she said simply" (89). Instead of revealing "shyness", which Esteban could interpret as submission, Clara acts boldly before her suitor. Perhaps she believes that she has control over her life, so she meets her fate with confidence and fearlessness. Clara makes it clear that she is an independent human being who won't be taken advantage of. In the real world, from the Spanish conquest of Chile to the early 1970s,

Chileans had been subjected to a predictable and rigid hierarchy, but they defied that system by electing Salvador Allende and socialism for the country. Lonely Planet, a travel information site, states that Chilean tenant farmers in the 1920s appeared to be completely in their landowners' control, who regulated their access to shelter and soil. The system did not change for decades because the farmers' votes also fell under the landowner's control, making them powerless to vote for reform (Lonely Planet, "History of Chile). However, Eric Bloom reported that Salvador Allende's socialist regime parcelled out land and set workers on higher social footing (Bloom, "CA and Chile"). The farmers and working class managed to achieve an opportunity to assert themselves and their roles in a society in opposition to the predictable hierarchy. Similar to breaking free from the reigns of religion, Chileans defied their predetermined fates. By rejecting the old hierarchy, the people of Chile also dramatically changed previously static society. Allende's portrayal of Clara's taking control of her premonitions ties in closely with the Chilean workers' reworking of the restrictive system.

In "The House of the Spirits", the role of ghosts and spirits in providing comfort and encouragement echoes the Chileans' instances of finding comfort and responsibility from their deceased family members. At the end of the novel, Alba survives imprisonment in her captors' "doghouse" when she believes Clara's spirit is with her. When Alba has nearly died in her prison, Clara appears and says, "You have a lot to do, so stop feeling sorry for yourself, drink some water, and start writing" (414). Clara interacts with Alba personally and advises her to write about and communicate the damage done to her. Clara gives Alba hope, and Alba then has the will to overcome her pain. Similarly, the women who danced the traditional Cueca dance without a partner secretly protested

for the government. Daily Kos, a political website, reports, "In Chile, women who were searching desperately for their disappeared relatives began to dance the cueca in public protests, but they danced it alone, with photos of their missing loved ones pinned to their dresses or hung about their necks"(cadjo4, "Pinochet and the cueca sola"). By wearing the "photos of their missing loved ones", these women felt encouraged to protest the government's policy of abducting and potentially killing civilians. It seems like their lost husbands and sons were with them and had given them hope and resolve. This form of protest, like Alba's mental writing, shows resilience and defiance in a nonviolent way, which is a step towards victory. As previously mentioned, the election of Salvador Allende to end social classes and Pinochet's written constitution to take away the Church's power effectively brought change with civil action.

History's ruling powers have been unforgiving on Chile's people. Chilean society has dictated religion, marriage partners, and even the life or death of loved ones. Chileans have fought this oppression with protest and efforts of reform that has completely transformed their society. This perseverance and resistance has deeply affected Allende, and through her insight with Magical Realism, readers might find strength in defiance as well.