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Silence, Feminine Artistic Creation and Isabel Allende's

La casa de los espíritus

by

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Abstract

This thesis is dedicated first and foremost to exploring the causal relationships between silence and feminine artistic creation, especially as they exist in Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus*. A basic premise of the argument is that silence must always exist within a context and that its context defines its significance. It further attempts to establish links between the motivations for silence, silence itself and artistic creation as it occurs during or following silence.

This study identifies and interprets specific examples from the life of each principal female character in the novel. These characters, Clara, Blanca and Alba, form a matriarchal line which unites all other characters and many events in the novel. It is noted that each of these characters voluntarily adopts silence after surviving a violent episode. Each proceeds to express herself through creative pursuits such as writing, sewing or pottery. In Allende's work, silence is treated as both an event in the narrative and as a linguistic sign whose interpretation depends on such factors as context, the reader and cultural considerations. Explorations of these cultural considerations include discussions of the spirituality of silence, politics and silence as a social construct.

The secondary theme of the thesis explores the same (potentially causal) relationships as they may exist outside the literary context of the novel. Examples of the Chilean *arpilleristas*, and the Argentinean Madres de la Plaza de Mayo are given as ones that somewhat parallel the experiences of the female characters in the novel insofar as they are women, mothers and survivors of violence and/or political turmoil.

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Another debt of gratitude also goes to my Co-Supervisor, Dr. E. Dansereau, whose experience as both a scholar and an administrator, coupled with her unfailing support and encouragement, helped to facilitate the timely completion of the work.

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Dedication

In memoriam

Brian Miller (1954-1995)

my cousin, friend and mentor who knew what it means to live in silence.

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Epigraph

“Nolites te bastardes carborundorum” (49).

-Margaret Atwood
The Handmaid's Tale

Introduction

“Go placidly amid the noise and haste and remember what peace there may be in silence,” advises the Desiderata.¹ Whether we are conscious of it or not, silence is part of our daily existence, be it in contemplative thought, worry, study or any number of activities which we undertake without speaking. In 1965 Tillie Olsen wrote an essay entitled “Silences” for Harper’s magazine. Twelve years later the essay had grown into an entire book on the same topic. Olsen’s book, while not entirely “academic” in nature (that is to say, it seems to be more of a free-flow of ideas rather than a critical examination of silence), does delve into silence in literature and the effect silence may have on creation.

Olsen does not attempt to clearly define silence, nor does she seem to embrace the concept that there may be “peace . . . in silence,” as the above adage indicates. Instead, she speaks of “hidden silences; work aborted, deferred, denied -- hidden by the work which does not come to fruition” (8). She also discusses the silence of censorship as being a deterrent, preventing the writer from telling his / her stories (9). Thus, Olsen seems to indicate that at times, silence is to the creator what a muzzle would be to an animal, that it prevents the writer from expressing himself / herself openly.

For Hélène Cixous, “silence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech, they are aphonic, and at times have lost more than speech: they are pushed to the point of choking, nothing gets through. They are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn’t heard because it’s the body that talks, and man doesn’t hear the body” (49). Like Olsen, Cixous in this instance posits silence as a somewhat destructive force, which cuts

¹ As found in old Saint Paul’s Church, Baltimore. Dated: 1692.

off the person (in this case, women specifically) from her voice, from expressing herself in a way which can be understood explicitly by others. Certainly, Cixous' statement that silence is the "mark" of hysteria posits feminine silence in particular as being suspect, out of control and weak. This is a far cry from the almost-too-idealistic placidity that silence represents in the popular Christian religious treatise noted above.

Deborah Castillo, in her book, *Talking Back: Toward a Latin American Feminist Criticism*, points out that a woman, "constrained by the absolute requirement of ignorance as a condition of goodness and suitability for married life, is unable to imagine a circumstance in which the silence may be broken" (37) and that, "society does not allow women to express themselves" (38). Like Cixous and Olsen, Castillo views silence as a force over which the subject (in this case, a Latin American female subject) has no control. The oppression of silence is part of the social fabric into which her existence is interwoven. She cannot escape from it. Or can she?

What if silence is neither a muzzle nor a "decapitation" as Olsen and Cixous seem to indicate? What if silence, already part of the social structure, can be redefined and used to empower, rather than to take away power? Moreover, what if silence is not "cut off" from communication at all, but is rather part of our entire communicative system which cannot be discussed in simply reductionist terms? These questions are central to the present study which will examine women's silence as it occurs in Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus* (1982).²

² All references to the novel are from the Plaza & Janés (1993) edition, published in Spanish. All page references are given in parenthetical notation.

The novel begins with a reference to muteness, that is to say the self-imposed silence of one of the main characters, Clara, “Ya entonces tenía el hábito de escribir las cosas más importantes y más tarde, cuando se quedó muda, escribía también las trivialidades . . .” (9). Despite the fact that the novel opens by alluding so explicitly to silence and continues to mention it throughout, one notes that the majority of critics (Marjorie Agosin excepted) have seldom noticed it and if so, they mention it in a rather perfunctory manner. Philip Swanson is among those who briefly refer to silence in a marginal way. Buried on the ninth page of his article, “Tyrants and Trash: Sex, Class and Culture in *La casa de los espíritus*,” is a minor reference to Clara’s silence which Swanson views as “a retreat into the Semiotic or Imaginary unity with the mother, a challenge to the Symbolic Order” (226). For him, silence is directly connected to the world of spirits -- “an essentially female space” (226), and he links it to the free space of the Lacanian Imagination. His references to Clara’s silence seem to reinforce the view of her as a flighty, celestial character who has more power as a spiritualist than as a writer whose narrative powers cause her to fill notebooks with the family’s history. Furthermore, Swanson overlooks Clara’s role as a mother who is there for her family in times of need.³ While in other parts of his study Swanson discusses the solidarity of the women and *campesinos* and the power they have, when he discusses silence, he fails to observe that *each* of the Trueba women becomes voluntarily silent and that this silence is part of a process which leads to her ultimate empowerment, as we will show in this thesis.

³ Clara’s ability to leave her celestial world and help her family in times of need are especially evident in the novel after the earthquake which destroys Las Tres Marias. Clara takes “charge of material things” (164), cooks (164), becomes Esteban’s nurse (164), and travels alone for the first time when she goes to fetch Blanca, who is ill, from school (166).

This study posits that silence is *not simply an absence of discourse*, a view that is traditional, canonical and patriarchal. Silence, when appropriated by the female subject, is as powerful (even if in a subversive and marginal manner) as the words of the masters, the men who prevent woman's voice from being heard. *La casa de los espíritus* lends itself to this theory because it clearly demonstrates how silence can lead to empowerment of the female subject.

One hypothesis is that silence never exists without a context. Olsen has indicated that silence can exist in the context of "censorship." Cixous discusses women's silence within the context of "hysteria", and Castillo within the larger -- and not so reductionist -- context of society. The present study recognizes that silence, while at times imposed from outside a subject, simply does not exist without impetus. There is a cause which leads the subject to reject certain forms of communication, regardless of whether or not the subject is conscious of the motivation. Thus, silence can be part of a process, or at least a causal relationship, between the motive that causes it and the silence itself. This relationship could be outlined as follows:

motivation→silence

The contexts in which the three writers above have discussed silence fit into this type of causal relationship. Once muzzled, or "decapitated", it becomes difficult for the individual to communicate. It would follow that, as a consequence, one is "cut off" from expression. But this does not necessarily have to be the end of the story, at least for Castillo, who recognizes that, "silence alone cannot provide an adequate basis for either a theory of literature or

concrete political action. Eventually women must break silence and write, negotiating the tricky domains of the said and unsaid..." (42). Here, Castillo recognizes that silence can be connected to writing, but like Olsen and Cixous, she views it as a weakening or destructive force which must be "broken" in order for women to express themselves. Thus, Castillo does not view silence as part of a process, but rather a pattern which must be broken. Her interpretation could be defined thus:

motivation → silence (result of motivation)

breaking silence → expression (result of the destruction of silence)

Castillo presents one view which leads the subject to create following silence. There is another viewpoint which has not been considered. That is one in which silence exists not only as a *result* of a causal relationship but also as a *stimulus* for finding new ways of expression. In other words, one can postulate that, once the subject rejects certain forms of communication and becomes silent, this can lead him or her to find new, previously unexplored ways to express himself or herself. Silence is then both the result of one action and the impetus for another. Such a theory could be expressed as:

motivation (event) → silence → new-found ways of expression

This hypothesis forms the basic premise for the argument presented in this thesis. Although the chapters themselves do not include the diagrams detailed in this introduction, the diagrams

do serve to indicate how silence will be addressed in this work. There is a parallel structure between the progression of the hypothesis presented above and the order of the chapters in this work.

It stands to reason that we must address not only the question of the female characters' silence(s), but also the causal relationships between the events which precede silence and the silence itself. So after reviewing the literature about the novel and silence in Chapter One, and briefly attempting to define silence for the purposes of this study in Chapter Two, Chapter Three deals with how the female characters in this novel re-define and re-appropriate silence for their own means, after surviving violence, which is the systematic cause for their silence. Allende crafts her tale using various kinds of silence to express emotions, defiant reticence or rebellion. This chapter will explore how traditional ideas of silence as an imposition is subverted when the female subject actively chooses silence instead of simply allowing it to be imposed on her. It is not until the next chapter that creation, as a product of silence, is addressed.

Chapter Four attempts to show how the female characters quietly empower themselves through creative expression born of their silence, leading them to survive both violence and violation, as they strengthen their sense of themselves as women and as human beings. As Colleen Kattau Craven notes in "The Dynamic of Memory and Imagination in *La casa de los espíritus* by Isabel Allende", the novel "spans three matrilineal generations (and one generation unborn)" (150). As in the previous chapter, examples will be given as they relate to the matriarchal line of the characters. That is to say that Clara will be studied first, Blanca second and Alba last.

While it is evident that the male characters in this novel, such as Esteban Trueba, do experience moments of silence, and masculine silence may be a product of a motivation, there is no systematic representation of silence as central to male characters' survival as it is for female characters. Nor do examples of masculine silence posit that silence is the central aspect of a process which leads to alternate forms of expression. Each of the key figures in this matriarchal line becomes silent at some point in her life due to circumstances beyond her control. These circumstances are not merely the ever-present social constraints discussed by Castillo, but are events which can be identified individually and explicitly through examples of violence and / or torture within the context of the novel. That is not to say that these "events" (ones which include domestic abuse, for example) are not influenced by cultural factors, but rather that they can be identified as individual events which are the direct cause of subsequent and deliberate silences on the part of the characters.

It is already evident that the novel is being considered within its "cultural" context. This, of course, presumes that the novel has such a context and that it is worthy of consideration. While the country in which the novel is set is never named, critics such as Kattau Craven (150), Marjorie Agosin (448 in "Isabel Allende: *La casa de los espíritus*"), Marcelo Coddou (167), Susan Lucas Dobrian (109), Gabriela Mora (54) and Alina Camacho-Gingerich (13) agree that the setting is the author's native Chile and the author relies heavily upon historical events to shape the events of the novel. In fact, Allende herself, in her chapter "Writing as an Act of Hope" in *Paths of Resistance: The Art and Craft of the Political Novel*, confesses that the novel did not begin as such, but rather as a letter to her grandfather as he lay dying in Chile, while she lived exiled in Venezuela (41-42). Peter Earle

adds that Allende's late grandmother is "the main model for Clara del Valle" (543), the character whose life unfolds throughout the novel from ten years of age until her death, and whose relationships to -- and with -- other characters are the common denominator which unites all the central, and many secondary, characters.

Thus, it is evident that a study of this novel needs to acknowledge that the culture, history and politics of the writer's homeland influenced the creation of this work, which was published less than ten years after the military coup which took the life of President Salvador Allende, the author's uncle. Willy Muñoz is one critic who maintains that the fiction of the novel simply cannot be separated from the actual events which it represents and ventures to suggest that "el lector . . . deja de considerar la ficcionalidad del texto y se concentra en una lectura basada en el convencimiento de la verosimilitud de lo que pasa en la novela" (434).

While this study does not go so far as to advise that one forget that the text is indeed a fiction, neither does it attempt to deny what an overwhelming number of critics agree upon, and that is that the events of this novel clearly parallel events that took place in Chile and to that end, that it can be considered a personal fictionalized account of history and culture. Therefore, considerations of culture, social constructs, religion and politics will not be ignored in this investigation.

Because it has been established that the novel is somewhat representative of history, and that social and political contexts are elements which cannot be ignored in an in-depth study of this novel, the issue of silence in a larger context -- that is to say, one outside the novel -- needs to be addressed. In other words, we will attempt to address the question of whether or not the hypothesis that

motivation (event) → silence → new-found ways of expression

holds true within the fictitious context of the novel, and whether it also holds true outside this context, that is to say, in reality. This would allow for a more globalized study of silence, one that does not limit itself solely to the literary realm. In order to undertake this second facet of the study, another artistic form, the Chilean appliquéd wall-hangings known as *arpilleras* -- and the women who created them -- will be discussed later in the study. *Arpilleras* have been chosen precisely because they have the same cultural context as the novel, that is to say, South America and specifically, Chile. The political violence portrayed in the novel is representative of the violence that took place under the military dictatorship in the 1970s in Chile. If some examples of the characters' silence in the novel stem from political violence in the given fictitious context, perhaps the *arpilleras* are a response to silence and political violence in real life. Such parallelisms will be defined and explored in Chapter Six.

A final note on the structure of the chapters requires a word of thanks to Ron Thorne-Finch. The structure of his work, *Ending the Silence: The Origins and Treatment of Male Violence against Women*, which includes theme-related subtitles throughout the chapters to complement the overall motif of the chapter, served as inspiration for the current study. Rather than fragment the text, these titles serve to underscore pertinent ideas that are central to the discussion.

Setting the Stage for Silence: Key Points to Consider in the Novel

Before progressing to the analysis of the novel, it is important to highlight some key

events that occur in this narrative and that place considerable emphasis on the familial and romantic relationships that exist between the characters. The following brief synopsis is offered to contextualize some of the examples that are offered throughout the rest of the study.

As mentioned, the novel opens by alluding openly to both silence and creation, by stating that Clara, at ten years of age engages actively in both activities, “Ya entonces tenía el hábito de escribir las cosas importantes y más tarde, cuando se quedó muda, escribía también las trivialidades . . .” (9). For Clara, writing is a habit, a lifelong pursuit that is explored further and becomes more prolific during her silences. It should be noted that words such as “se quedó muda”, indicate that Clara’s silence is voluntary. The verb choice here is a reflexive one, “quedarse”. This verb complements the noun well, but the narrator could have chosen another expression that would have avoided any implications that the silence was self-imposed, such as “hacerle callar” or “estar reducida al silencio”. Systematically throughout the novel, however, this is not the case. Often, the verbs used to discuss the female characters’ silence in this novel imply that silence is a *choice* on the part of the character, as the above example indicates.

Clara is also psychically gifted and is able to predict the future and perform telekinesis. Her first episode of silence occurs after she witnesses the post-mortem violation of her sister, Rosa, at the hands of the medical assistant who is supposedly preparing the body for burial. None of the family’s attempts to coax Clara into speaking again are successful. Instead she focuses on the spirit world, Uncle Marcos’ books and her own *cuadernos*. These notebooks serve Alba, two generations later, to fill in gaps in the narrative for it is she, along with her

grandfather, who jointly narrate the story.

Alba's grandfather, Esteban Trueba had been promised Rosa's hand in marriage. Upon her death, he dedicates himself to making his estate, *Las Tres Marias*, a success. He returns nine years later to request Clara's hand in marriage. Clara, whose clairvoyant abilities caused her to expect the proposal, accepts and the two are married.

Clara, a celestial character who prefers the spirit world to the real one, is a somewhat detached wife. It quickly becomes evident that Esteban's obsession to be successful extends to his wife and his marriage, and he is convinced that one day Clara will be the wife of his dreams, "Esteban se juró que tarde o temprano ella llegaría a amarlo en la forma en que necesitaba ser querido, aunque para lograrlo tuviera que emplear los recursos más extremos" (97). Although the couple lack a certain intimacy, their first child, Blanca, is born not long after they are married. As a toddler at the country home, Blanca encounters Pedro Tercero (105), her playmate who would go on to be her lifelong love. During Clara's second pregnancy (with twins, as she correctly predicts), it becomes clear that Clara is in no condition to continue the pregnancy in the country and the family prepares to return to the city. The trip tires Clara significantly and she enters a long period of silence to recuperate (112). She speaks again only a few days before the babies are born.

Jaime and Nicolás are born in the family's city residence. Their names are a point of grave contention between Clara and Esteban. The latter is enraged and demands that his sons have traditional family names and that one of them ought to carry their father's name. Clara carefully explains, "los nombres repetidos crean confusión en los cuadernos de anotar la vida y se mantuvo inflexible en su decisión" (114). Episodes such as this one demonstrate how

important the creation of her texts is to her and establish that she is willing to endure the wrath of her husband to protect them.

As Blanca and Pedro Tercero grow from childhood into adolescence, their relationship matures as they do. They keep it secret, intuitively knowing that their class difference would make them an unacceptable couple. At this time, Pedro Tercero begins to express his leftist political convictions in the lyrics of the songs he writes (149). As Blanca and Pedro Tercero secretly become more attached to one another, Clara and Esteban become more distant, a progression culminating in the installation of a bolt on Clara's bedroom door (173) and her declaration that their marriage has deteriorated beyond repair.

Jean de Satigny mysteriously befriends Esteban and subsequently asks for Blanca's hand in marriage (178). She declines, but soon after becomes pregnant with Pedro Tercero's baby. Upon learning this, her father is enraged and forces her to marry the Frenchman (205). Jean whisks Blanca away to live with him in the North (237) where she lives contentedly until she discovers the terrible and dark side of her husband, concludes that her soon-to-be-born daughter cannot grow up under his roof and leaves him to return to life with her parents (248). Once returned to the safety of the family home, she resumes her practice of creating ceramic figures, a custom she had given up during marriage, despite long letters from her mother encouraging her not to give up her artistic endeavours.

Alba is born in her grandparent's house (250), where she grows up surrounded by her clairvoyant mother, her irritable grandfather (253), her celestial grandmother (254) and her bibliophilic uncle Jaime (257). Blanca takes Alba to meet her biological father, Pedro Tercero, at a pre-arranged meeting in a park (264). Following this reunion, the two lovers begin to see

one another again.

Esteban García, the bastard son of Esteban Trueba, seeks out his biological father to petition him for money, so that he may go to school to learn to become a policeman. While awaiting his estranged father, he encounters Alba and clumsily attempts to assault her sexually (272), but is interrupted by the imminent arrival of his *patrón*, who concedes to the young man's request for money and sends him away. This event foreshadows the torture Alba will suffer at her illegitimate brother's hands some years later when she is arrested after a military *coup d'état* has occurred, during which her brother Jaime is assassinated (350) and her lover, Miguel, has become known as a revolutionary and goes underground (376). After her arrest (381) she is taken to Coronel Esteban García. The young boy used the money his *patrón* gave him not only to become a police officer, but also to gain the power to seek revenge on the girl who is heir to "his" fortune. Finally he has Alba at his mercy and (ab)uses the power afforded him by his position to interrogate, torture and rape her.

Alba is later released from prison and returns to the family home to live once again with her grandfather, where she begins to write her testimony. This testimony is later combined with her grandfather's narrative when she writes her family's history. Alba also retrieves her grandmother's notebooks from the basement-- where they have been stored since her death -- and uses the information and stories contained in them to round out her own narration of the family's history. Clara's notebooks become an essential component of the narrative because Clara's relationships to other characters and her experiences are different from Esteban's and so the content of her diaries enhance and enrich the story in a unique way that could not be achieved without her textual contribution.

In fact, Alba comments that the notebooks, not only “servirían para rescatar la memoria del pasado” but also help her “sobrevivir a [su] propio espanto”. Alba mentions the dual purpose of the notebooks, both at the very beginning of the novel on page 9 and reiterates these words on the final page of the novel (411). This repetition underscores the significance of both the contents of the *cuadernos* from a historical point of view (they help Alba to fill in gaps in her chronicle), but also from a personal and mental point of view. By reading, interpreting and understanding what her grandmother wrote, Alba is able to piece together her family’s history and she is able to re-construct and re-define herself, her memories, her identity and her dignity after surviving torture at the hands of García. Alba’s very act of writing is an empowering one because she ensures the story will not be lost, will not be left to gather dust as her grandmother’s diaries were before she read them. Her act of writing allows her to recuperate mentally, spiritually and emotionally while she also recuperates physically after her ordeal. Alba’s writing parallels the Chilean *arpilleras*, insofar as they too, are a creative act born out of a need to survive and a desire for a story to be told and for a past to be preserved.

In this brief summary of the events of the novel, the relationship between the episodes of silence and creative activity may be intuitively apprehended. The novel’s distinct development of this relationship will be examined in subsequent chapters.

Chapter One

Studying the Past

What the Critics Say: Existing Studies on *La casa de los espíritus*

Philip Swanson, in his article, "Tyrants and Trash: Sex, Class and Culture in *La casa de los espíritus*", declares that, "The strength of a novel like *La casa de los espíritus* . . . is that what it lacks in richness and multiplicity, it gains in sheer emotional and political power" (218). That is perhaps because, while the parallels between the fictitious world in which Allende's characters live and her own native Chile are never openly stated in the novel, they are difficult to refute, as has been noted. In fact, Marjorie Agosín, in her article, "Isabel Allende: *La casa de los espíritus*", argues that, "*La casa de los espíritus* presenta una doble lectura textual. En primer término, la historia de la familia Trueba y sus inolvidables integrantes, de hijos legítimos y bastardos. En un segundo nivel, la novela sugiere nítidamente la historia política y social de Chile desde fin de siglo hasta la época actual" (448).

This political richness has led to numerous investigations of the novel (including those of Swanson and Agosín cited above) which allow the reader to understand one of the underlying contexts of the novel. The political aspects of the book have been studied from varied, and not strictly literary, perspectives as well. For example, in *Viva: Women and Popular Protest in Latin America*, a collection of essays on the situation of the Latin American woman, Catherine M. Boyle explores the position of Chilean women in the 1970s. In her essay, "Touching the Air: The Cultural Force of Women in Chile", she cites the protagonist of *La casa de los espíritus* as a typical example of the politically active Chilean

woman.

The political aspects of the novel, along with considerations of its “magical realism,”⁴ have led to various studies which compare *La casa de los espíritus* to the renowned South American novel, *Cien años de soledad* (1967) by Gabriel García Márquez. Both novels address the themes of the supernatural, the history of a family, and the social and political history of the native countries of each author, thus providing the structure for intense comparative studies of the two works. Susan Lucas Dobrian’s article, “El mito y la magia femenina en *La casa de los espíritus*” is among the more notable of these comparative studies. However, other critics are not satisfied to simply compare the two works, as Robert Antoni demonstrates in his article, “Parody or Piracy: The Relationship of *The House of the Spirits* to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*”, in which he speaks disapprovingly of Allende’s novel, calling it a plagiarism or at the very least, an obvious imitation of García Márquez’s masterpiece.

But whether it be in a positive Aristotelian sense that one must imitate great masterpieces in order to produce/create art oneself or in the more modern and much more negative sense of plagiarism, the criticism that Allende’s first novel is simply an imitation of the Columbian writer’s greatest, most canonized and revered work is somewhat unfair. Any

⁴In *Manual de términos literarios*, Joe Bas and George Iwanaga define “el realismo mágico” as a “tendencia literaria de mediados del siglo XX que consiste en deformar los conceptos del tiempo y espacio, para presentar una visión turbia, a veces sobrenatural, de acontecimientos y hechos cotidianos, resultando que tanto los personajes como el lector se trasladan a un mundo de fantasía” (136). Gloria Bautista, a feminist and Hispanist, supports this in her article, “El realismo mágico en *La casa de los espíritus*,” by stating that Allende uses magical realism to “expresar lo inexpresable en una tierra donde la realidad y la magia son inseparables” (299).

critic who chooses to label a work as being simply an imitation of another must also intend to discredit and devalue the artist's own, independent capacity to create.

This accusation led to feminist readings of *La casa de los espíritus* which opened a dialogue in favour of the novel, defending it not as a plagiarism of García Márquez, but rather as a re-reading of the canonized text – one with its own literary, political and creative roots. Elzbieta Sklodowska in her book, *La parodia en la nueva novela hispanoamericana (1960-1985)* goes so far as to posit Allende's work as a parody of García Márquez' novel saying that, "La parodia aparece en *La casa de los espíritus* en forma de un juego irónico y ambivalente de rechazo y atracción, de apropiación y transgresión y no como una mera reproducción de *Cien años de soledad*" (155).

Like Sklodowska, Philip Swanson also is among those who defend that Allende's work is hardly a plagiarism of García Márquez's novel, claiming, "The effect of her work is to invert the García Márquez model rather than imitate it" (218). This "inversion" is most evident at the end of Allende's novel when Alba is preparing for the arrival of her baby. Alba's unborn baby represents hope for the future. In contrast, the birth at the end of *Cien años de soledad* could hardly be considered representative of hope or new beginnings, since the baby is born with a "cola de cerdo," a pig's tail, indicating an almost sub-human state. Moreover, in one of the last scenes of the García Marquez work, the child is found dead, being voraciously devoured by ants. This powerful scene at the end of the novel expresses the end of the familial line, or rather, that the story has come full-circle and will, like the Buendía line, end.

One notes with interest that, while *Cien años de soledad* closes on a somewhat more

negative note than *La casa de los espíritus*, it is also based on a patriarchal family history where the men are the political, military and even intellectual leaders and women are relegated to being mothers, sisters and whores. In other words, the García Márquez novel presents women's roles only as they relate to men's roles. The female characters in the novel are not strong, independent women whose existence as women plays a prominent role in the work.

Allende's novel focuses more on matriarchal relationships and ends with a new life -- the ultimate creation of the mother-figure -- representing new hope for the future. Various readings of Allende's novel have been dedicated to its feminist or matriarchal elements, in which the importance of the female subject is paramount. Women and their roles are both explored and celebrated in these readings. Among them are, "Escrituras y escritoras: The Artist-Protagonists of Isabel Allende" by Susan de Carvalho and "Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus* and the Literature of Matrilineage" in which Mary Gómez Parham considers the themes of communication between generations and addresses the mother-figure as the link between the past and the future. She cites an essential element in the literature of matrilineage as "the importance assigned to communication between women" (194) and declares that *La casa de los espíritus* "is indeed a book that must be placed with the literature of matrilineage, as the novel . . . portrays a woman's foremother as the link to her past, as her nurturer, protector and teacher" (200).

Thus, two different schools of thought are evident in the criticism of *La casa de los espíritus*. There are those studies which cast a dark shadow over the novel, by judging it as a failed imitation of another, whereas others bring the positive aspects of the novel to light, seeking and defending the original and/or the feminine / feminist aspects, and maintaining the

value of Allende's first work for what it is: Isabel Allende's personal (understood as being biased and/or fictionalized) account of her family and her country which began as a letter of anecdotal memories of her grandfather as he lay dying, and later became her first novel.⁵

Silence Within the Chilean Literary Context

Intertextual references between *La casa de los espíritus* and other works have been firmly established by various critics, as was noted above. This, however, is only part of the context in which the novel exists; there is also the historical context of the novel to consider. Before Allende, Gabriela Mistral⁶ (1889-1957) was among the first of Chilean women writers of some note to address the question of woman as absence; that is to say, she claimed that women do not have a voice in society, simply because they are women, while men possess both "voice" and power. Boyle postulates that the poet laureate:

was searching for ways of being female that were not pure negation, that were not a continual act of asserting in the face of negative values, in the face of being defined as everything that was not male: ways, that is, that expressed the positive, the active, the possibilities of women, whether won and fulfilled, or lost and abandoned. (156)

⁵ See Isabel Allende's essay "Writing as an Act of Hope" in *Paths of Resistance: The Art and Craft of the Political Novel* (1989) for her personal account of the development of *La casa de los espíritus*.

⁶ Born Lucila Godoy Alcayaga, Mistral became famous in 1914 after being awarded a Chilean national prize for her three famous "Sonnets of Death". Then, in 1945 she was Nobel Prize Laureate -- the first Latin American ever to have this honour bestowed on her work.

Boyle continues by exploring Mistral's preoccupation with physical and political spaces in her texts, saying that Mistral:

named the right to self, to dominion. That is crucial, and is at the heart of the impetus for expression, cultural and political, of women in Chile today, who are now naming themselves, and whose 'kingdoms', like those of Gabriela Mistral's princess, are born from the imagination, go beyond the self and the confines of their physical limits into politics, into what has too long been referred to as public life. Women in feminist movements look to transgress the boundaries of power, but by being women, by acting as women, by demanding as women and as citizens. They are looking to neutralize the idea of public and private realms. They are moving the political parameters, placing themselves in the center, in multiple centers of political life; they are renaming the problem, eliminating the notion of the 'woman question', which has long been defined as a problem, and posing the real problem of the gender question, which goes deep to the roots of society. (157)

Allende's characters also make demands both as women and as citizens. Clara's mother, Nivea, is noted as being a politically conscious feminist, one who leaves the comfort of her home with suffragette colleagues to petition the factories for better working conditions (83) and is later called "la primera feminista del país" (120). Clara, who accompanies her mother on her suffragette excursions, recognizes the discrepancy between the social class in which her family lives and the poverty of the factory workers to whom her mother speaks (83). There is a definite dichotomy established between the classes at this point in the novel.

It is clear that for all Nivea's philanthropic intentions, she has never lived in the same conditions as the women to whom she preaches. Despite her bourgeois attitudes, she is still the very first among the family women to be even slightly politically or socially aware. Even if Nivea never leaves the comfort of her own class to undertake charitable work, her deeds do have an effect on Clara, who develops her own social consciousness, even if only to note the futility of her mother's practise when she writes, "con asombrosa intuición, que las obras de caridad no podían mitigar la monumental injusticia" (83). Clara ultimately does not follow in her mother's hypocritical but well-intended footsteps. She does, however, roll up her sleeves to work side by side with the peasants, in particular, Pedro Segundo, after an earthquake destroys Las Tres Marías (158-159). Unlike her mother, Clara does not simply preach to those less fortunate. In times of need, she works with them.

Each generation becomes progressively more politically and socially aware. Blanca, who secretly guards huge stashes of food for the family, maintaining that "pase lo que pase, no hay que bajar de nivel" (332). But later, Alba points out the selfishness of her mother's attitude and Blanca has a change of heart. Her social awareness uproots her desire for middle-class comforts as she opens the home to hungry children and women and feeds them, despite her father's disapproval (361). Blanca is also politically aware enough to know that her lifelong love, Pedro Tercero, is in grave danger after his name is published in a list of people who should present themselves to the authorities (369). She secretly hides him in one of the many rooms of the house and does not reveal that he is there until she begs her father to help him escape from the country (371).

Alba is the most politically aware and socially active of the Trueba women. She

participates in political protests (304), shows enough political awareness to debate her opinions with her grandfather (316), steals from the family's food supply to give it to her revolutionary *compañeros* (333), transports those in need of asylum to embassies and assists them to get past the guards (359), sells the furniture and paintings in the house to give the money to her rebel friends (377), and is finally arrested for her political endeavours.

While Boyle overlooks the political acts of Allende's characters, she does point out that in 1989, 2000 women in Santiago "walked in silence along the main avenues of the centre of Santiago, carrying cardboard cut-outs of 'disappeared' people, each one with a name.⁷ No words were spoken, only the image was seen, uncontaminated by slogans, for by that time the word was not to be trusted in Chile" (170). The political regime which caused the disappearance of thousands of Chileans led to the awakened political consciousness of (perhaps) previously apolitical female figures, thus causing them to act individually (each one making a placard) and collectively (protesting) and, most intriguing, choosing not to use words to express their discontent, but finding other silent means to express their anger, their protest and their rebellion. Before the Chilean women, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo (discussed in more detail below) were perhaps among the first who dared to transgress the open spaces of the city to protest and place themselves at the centre of attention. Moreover,

⁷ In *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras*, Marjorie Agosin notes:

The term *disappearances* was used for the first time to describe a specific governmental practice which was applied on a wide scale in Guatemala after 1966, in Chile toward the end of 1973 and in Argentina beginning in March, 1976. *To disappear* means to be snatched off a street corner, or dragged from one's bed, or taken from a movie theatre or café either by police, soldiers or men in civilian clothes, and from that moment on, to disappear from the face of the earth, leaving not a single trace. It means that all knowledge of the *disappeared* is totally lost. (3-4)

they redefined their artistic space to reflect their awakened political consciousness.

If we examine how space is “redefined” in Allende’s novel, two examples stand out. Both involve the private space of the home being converted into a sanctuary for political activists, first when Alba offers temporary refuge to escapees until safe transport to an embassy can be arranged (359), and secondly when Blanca confesses that she has been concealing her lover, Pedro Tercero, in one of the many rooms of the large family home to protect him (369).

Previous Studies on Silence, Marginality and the Subject

References to silence can be found in Hispanic literature since Sor Juana Inéz de la Cruz (1651-1695) and perhaps earlier. Sor Juana’s renowned “Respuesta a Sor Filotea,”⁸ responds to a letter from Bishop don Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz signed as “Sister Filotea”, a fellow nun, in which he suggests that Sor Juana give up studying and writing as these pursuits are not becoming of a Christian woman, let alone a nun. Sor Juana pleads ignorance, but counters the letter point for point, making an even stronger case for women’s erudition. Although she mentions silence often, one of the most poignant instances is when she subtly reappropriates the meaning of the biblical phrase “Women learn in silence” by saying, “*Mulier in silentio discat*, siendo este lugar [de la Biblia] más en favor que en contra de las mujeres, pues manda que aprendan, y mientras aprenden claro está que es necesario que callen.” She

⁸ Quoted here from, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: Selección*. Madrid: Editorial Nacional, 1978 (80-81).

goes on to argue, “Y también está escrito: *Audi Israel, et tace*⁹; donde se habla con toda la colección de los hombres y mujeres, y a todos se manda callar, porque quien oye y aprende es mucha razón que atienda y calle.”

Despite Sor Juana’s direct references to silence and women’s education in her letter of 1691, it is still somewhat difficult to encounter Spanish or Latin American literary criticism which directly considers the question of silence within a text written by a woman. This is not to say that critics of Hispanic literature do not recognize silence as operational within texts. On the contrary, one can find references to silence in numerous studies (Swanson’s article, for example). But these references are for the most part marginal commentaries that have little to do with the main theme of the present study, for as Swanson proved earlier, critics rarely link women’s silence to empowerment, nor do they see it as sometimes having its roots in violence stemming from a patriarchal society.

However, Marjorie Agosín is one critic who has set herself apart from others by openly and deliberately confronting the question of silence in Latin American women’s discourse. She casts her gaze widely on all aspects of culture: the women to whom she refers may be authors, characters in a book or everyday people. In her book of essays, *Women of Smoke* (1989), she comments on how a Hispanic woman’s silence is imposed on her from the outside, and has been for centuries, by the patriarchal society in which she lives and the

⁹ Quiet, Israel and listen.

Church in which she believes.¹⁰ Agosin states that this silence has become a tool that women have learned to use to question that same society and demand that it take responsibility for its wrongdoings, "By their public actions, they have become important and influential in Latin American politics. They have learned to use old political techniques in new and dramatic ways. For instance, their silent and passive marches speak louder and more eloquently than any oration would" (42). Used initially to constrain and make invisible, silence can be subversively used to deny its intended effect.

The silent protests of women referred to by Agosin are those such as the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, women in Argentina who in April of 1977 began to passively and silently march around the Plaza de Mayo to protest the disappearance of their sons, brothers and husbands and other family members. Each woman wore on her head a white handkerchief with the names of her "disappeared" loved ones and the last date they were seen embroidered around the edge. The women met and protested every Thursday at the same hour and their protests became well-known, not only in Argentina, but in many parts of South America and beyond.

Agosin recounts that the military told the women to go home, but that the protesters used to their advantage the tradition the Spaniards brought to the New World of treating the mother-figure with the utmost respect and veneration, and the soldiers left the protesters for the most part unharmed (37-38). Furthermore, she maintains that such silent protests

¹⁰ Agosin's view that silence is imposed on a woman from outside her places woman at the centre, surrounded by an oppressive patriarchal force. This is an intriguing contrast to Boyle's comment about women moving "political parameters, placing themselves in the centre, in multiple centres of political life" (157). For Agosin, being in the "centre" almost seems to imply being oppressed while the opposite is true for Boyle.

empower the women and shape them into politically aware figures who question, without uttering even one word, the military and their actions:

The white kerchiefs and the slow, silent, circular march around the pyramid in the Plaza de Mayo create a female political character. The silence reflects the silence imposed on the female gender for centuries, which relegated women to waiting, to resignation. But here, silence holds a new significance. It is a silence that accuses, a silence that asks, "Where are our children?" (93)

In this example, the connection between women's silence and their creativity is evident. The embroidery of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo is an inversion of the feminine (stereo)type associated with crafts and domestic artistry. The female subject here is not one who spends her time on frivolities such as decorating a plain white kerchief to increase its aesthetic value, but rather one who uses the tools and materials at hand to express her social and political awareness, thus converting her artistry into a sign of protest.

The words (true or untrue) of the politicians and soldiers directed towards the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo such as, "Your son is in the underground and is outside the country" (Agosin 36) may disappear into nothingness once spoken. However the kerchiefs created by the protesters would endure, silently representing forever that other creation of the female body, the child (in this case, every "disappeared" person whose mother has yearned to know his/her whereabouts).

Agosin's studies of the *arpilleras* and their creators, the *arpilleristas*, such as "Agujas que hablan: las arpilleristas chilenas" and *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras* also offer the reader innovative theories about how women express themselves without words. Agosin

discusses how these subjects “speak” through their art and how they remember and preserve their stories in much the same way as Allende’s character, Alba, writes down the story of her family “para rescatar las cosas del pasado y sobrevivir a [su] propio espanto” (411).

However, studies such as those by Agosín, in which the author explores the phenomenon of silence as it relates to women, are the exception. Studies of this theme are more common outside of Hispanic literary circles, such as Patricia Laurence’s *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (1991), in which the various types of silence Woolf employs in her narrative are studied. Laurence’s stand is that Woolf was a marginalized subject in her society, not only for being a woman (let alone being a “woman writer”) but also for being an openly innovative thinker with regards to women’s issues.

Another study of note is Leslie Kane’s *The Language of Silence: On the Unspoken and the Unspeakable in Modern Drama* (1984). Kane’s fundamental premise is that the instances of silence that one finds in drama are charged with significance and that this significance must first be interpreted by the actor and secondly by the audience, and that it is the interpretation of silence which is crucial, rather than simply the fact that there are no words spoken at a given moment. Kane delves, if only superficially, into the semiotics of silence, pointing towards the multiplicity of the silent (rather than linguistic) sign as an almost malleable medium through which a variety of messages can be conveyed and/or understood. While Kane’s work deals specifically with drama, some of the ideas contained within it can be helpful for the present study for, if we link silence in the novel to a larger context (social, political, artistic), it then must be understood as being both multiple in meaning and malleable as a “sign” to be interpreted by the reader.

Finally, we return once again to Philip Swanson's article, in which he quotes Allende herself, saying, "Allende's aim is to provide 'una voz que habla por los que sufren y callan en nuestra tierra': in other words, is to push the marginal into the mainstream" (218). Swanson focuses on the marginalized figure in his study and looks at both women and the *campesinos* as subjects marginalized by Latin American society. Moreover, he uses the *campesinos* of *Las Tres Marias* in *La casa de los espíritus* as an example of a marginalized group who lack both sufficient work and human rights in order to sustain themselves. Finally, he explores the relationships between the social and political systems shaped by patriarchal attitudes and the fight of marginalized groups for human rights. He connects silence to traditional preconceptions of power and obedience, arguing that those with a voice are those with the power. Swanson puts the *campesinos* and women in the same category; that is to say, powerless and voiceless in a hierarchy in which they are at the bottom and the ruling patriarchy rests in the seat of power at the top.

Swanson's claim leads to the conclusion that women's silence is not simply an absence of words, but rather is the product of various social, political and psychological elements and that it is often a construct of society. This constructed silence has become associated with the characteristics of submission, obedience and subservience to the more powerful male figure. Agosin is among those few writers who have explored the silence of the female subject in conjunction with these other factors. Her theories and examples shape this study as we examine women's silence in *La casa de los espíritus*.

Chapter Two

Breaking the Code: Understanding and Defining Silence

In order to fulfill our objective of studying silence in the novel, we must first endeavour to define what we mean when we use the term “silence”. While what follows is hardly an exhaustive definition of silence, it does explore what silence is and isn’t for the purposes of this study. Silence will be studied from two different perspectives in this chapter. The first is silence as an event in the narrative. As has already been discussed, one can correlate instances of silence to episodes of violence in the novel. One can further associate these silences as being a precursor to some sort of creative activity on the part of the character who has willfully adopted silence. Thus, silence becomes an “event” that can be associated with other events in the novel. The characters themselves make silence an event, for example, during Clara’s first extended silence at nine years of age. The family doctor prescribes pills, vitamins in syrup and throat swabbings with borax honey (76). Her parents take her to see a Rumanian magician/hypnotist named Rostipov who gives her violet-colored placebo pills, but says it is not because of any illness that Clara does not speak, but simply because she does not wish to do so (76-77). Her parents then try sending her to bed without supper to make her speak and Nana tries various methods to frighten the young girl into speaking, all to no avail (77). Thus, Clara’s silence, and her family’s attempts to overcome it, open the third chapter, establishing this first silence of Clara’s as a major event not only in her life, but also as an event that affects those around her.

The second perspective from which we will examine silence is a semiotic one. Silence as a linguistic sign -- a signifier whose signified depends upon the context in which it occurs --

will be studied. Different episodes of silence in the novel will be explored and from these it will be shown how each one stems from a different set of circumstances and whose meaning may be interpreted differently by the reader, although they all follow the same pattern. Chapter Three presents a more in-depth discussion of silence as a social/cultural construct, but it is nonetheless crucial to recognize at this point that any understanding of silence as signified must necessarily be shaped by cultural factors. For example, if we are discussing a Latin American society whose values are shaped at least partially by the Roman Catholic Church, the teachings of the Church will play a role in how silence is understood within that context, as Sor Juana demonstrated so eloquently three centuries ago in her *Respuesta a Sor Filotea*.

The Spirituality of Silence

It is evident that references to the positive connotations of silence have existed for centuries, many of which derive from religious teachings or practises. One example within the Hispanic tradition is the quiet religious contemplation of mystics such as nun and writer Saint Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582) whose silent meditations led to mystical experiences.¹¹ Leslie Kane notes that other faiths also place a high value on silence, stating, “Hermetic traditions such as Zen, Taoism, mysticism, and Hasidism have always placed a premium on silent communication, regarding the act of speech as human intervention, presumption, assertion, vulgarization, indeed, blasphemy” (21). Kane uses strong language to convey the idea that

¹¹ Born Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada in Ávila, Spain, she became a Carmelite nun at the age of 19. Her mystical experiences became well-known throughout Spain and she began writing mystical and ascetical literature at the age of 47.

one can achieve a higher, or perhaps “purer” spiritual state through silent contemplation.

Christian writer Morton T. Kelsey agrees with Kane, saying:

No one in Eastern religions doubts the value of silence. The practise of being alone in stillness is certainly central in Hindu religion. Yoga and also various forms of Buddhist meditation begin and end in silence. Throughout Zen the value of utter stillness is emphasized; the goal of *satori* is to reach this ultimate peace, and the novice begins searching while sitting in the lotus position. There is a strong tradition in Chinese religious thought that the way of coming into harmony with tao, which is the ultimate principle of reality, is by inner quiet, by stilling the inner confusion so that one comes to peace and harmony within. Almost the same approach is found in certain sects of Islamic religion. (94)

Kelsey goes on to argue that “We forget that silence is equally important in the Christian tradition, starting with the long history of experiences of the Hebrew people” (94). He goes on to cite major events of Jesus’ life as having taken place when He was by Himself, in silent contemplation, such as when He is alone in the desert for forty days and nights and faces Satan (95). According to Kelsey, there are similarities between Christian and non-Christian traditions insofar as both value silence as a way to “disconnect, to unhook from much of the activity” (97) in order to look inwards, become self-directed and move “toward wholeness” (98).

Conceivably one could argue that the female characters of *La casa de los espíritus* attempt to find peace and tranquillity during their long periods of silence and escape the

violence that has led up to their refusal to speak. Silence is called a “refugio brahamánico” (113) in the novel, which also leads the reader to associate silence with both a sanctuary and a higher spiritual state. Agosín, in her article “Isabel Allende: *La casa de los espíritus*”, points out that Clara does indeed withdraw from the world to find a quiet refuge within herself (451). She is undoubtedly also the character with the strongest connection to the spiritual world, as she has clairvoyant abilities and seems to be able to communicate with those who have passed on. Thus, positive associations between silence and spirituality are established and silence takes on connotations of protection, tranquillity and peacefulness.

But these associations are not the only ones connected to silence, nor is the spiritual aspect of silence one on which we will focus in depth. However, the above examples serve to illustrate a crucial point: that silence can be viewed as something other than a void or simply an absence.

The (Con)text(s) of Silence

Patricia Ondek Laurence supports the view that silence is something more than a lack or deficiency, “Silence as an idea, as a response to life, as a space for writing, as part of a narrative method is . . . not an ‘emptiness’ dependent on the notion of lack or absence” (33).

While Kane also disagrees with a reductionist view of silence, she takes it one step further and explores the richness of different kinds of silences:

. . . expression such as innuendo, intimation, hesitation, reticence and ambivalent speech . . . implicitly conveys more than it states. To adhere strictly to the commonly accepted, narrow definition of silence as the absence

of speech would eliminate these diverse forms of implicit expressions as elements of a language of silence. (15)

In fact, if one approaches silence as something that is “alive”, as Bakhtin would say, then one can study it within its context, in conjunction with spoken dialogue and endless other factors in the given set of circumstances, because what Bakhtin states about words in *The Dialogic Imagination* could also be applied to silence:

. . . no living word relates to its object in a singular way: between the word and its object, between the word and the speaking subject, there exists an elastic movement of other, alien words about the same object, the same theme, and this is an environment that is often difficult to penetrate. It is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape. (276)

Although Bakhtin is referring here to the relationship between words and their objects, the concept that words “live” translates effectively to silence and it is this living silence which we will attempt to explore. Also, the concept of “interaction,” as perceived by Bakhtin is important for an interpretation of silence which allows the reader to engage the text intellectually and respond to the silence. We understand silence as part of a complex system of relations between the reader, the character(s), the context and the dialogue. Silence must be studied as it relates to and as part of discourse, not outside of its (con)text.

Silence in the novel is closely connected with these factors and others, and it is through the active questioning and participation of the reader that it can be more fully understood. First, it is necessary to be acquainted with the context, the examples, in which

silence is present. Then one must understand the relationship between silence and the characters. Finally, one can identify the connection between silence and one's own background, predispositions and cultural prejudices which lead readers to interpret silence in individual ways.

These criteria are perhaps best understood through an example of a memorable episode in the novel in which the young Clara del Valle is witness to the *post mortem* sexual assault of her sister, Rosa, at the hands of Dr. Cuevas' assistant, once he has finished her autopsy:

Y no pudo moverse hasta que aparecieron las primeras luces. Entonces se deslizó hasta su cama, sintiendo por dentro todo el silencio del mundo. El silencio la ocupó enteramente y no volvió a hablar hasta nueve años después, cuando sacó la voz para anunciar que se iba a casar. (45)¹²

This episode is narrated by Alba in the third person. Presumably she uses the information contained in her grandmother's notebooks to narrate an episode that occurred many years before her own birth. The words "el silencio la ocupó enteramente" confirm that silence definitively establishes itself in her and becomes part of her makeup from that point forward.

One could argue that Clara's muteness is the involuntary reaction of the traumatized child. Perhaps this is true, but if so the question remains as to how and why this silence lasts nine years if it is the reaction of a child to trauma. The answer to this is found in the opening lines of the third chapter when the reader learns, "Clara tenía diez años cuando *decidió* que

¹² It is interesting to note that Clara's first silence begins at dawn, the literal beginning of a new day and the metaphoric commencement of a new life and of hope.

no valía la pena hablar y se encerró en el mutismo. Su vida cambió notablemente” (76) (My emphasis). This portion of the text is also narrated by Alba. The reader is led to believe that the narrator has a very close relationship to Clara since the narrator has intimate knowledge of Clara’s perceptions and decisions. This later quotation confirms the earlier idea that silence has a momentous effect on Clara and her life changes after having adopted it.

The reader is never openly told whether Clara’s first long-term silence is the result of shock or active and conscious recognition that the violation of her deceased sister is an abhorrent act. But the use of the verb “to decide” in this instance implies an active choice, negating the possibility that her silence is simply an involuntary reaction to a disturbing event. And throughout the novel the reader is often not told explicitly *why* characters become mute after being witness to, or part of, a violent episode (perhaps to imply that they themselves do not know?). But what is evident is that the subject almost always, consciously and actively, chooses silence in favour of spoken communication.

However, critics such as George Steiner would argue that even if one does not speak, one does not stop communicating, for as he states in *Language and Silence*:

The totality of human linguistic production, the sum of all significant lexical and syntactic units generated by human beings, can be divided into two portions: audible and inaudible, voiced and unvoiced. The unvoiced or internal components of speech span a wide arc. (91)

Thus we are led to agree with philosophers of language such as Steiner and other semioticians, who argue that silence forms part of our communicative system and methods, and therefore cannot be disconnected from dialogue.

Returning to the example from the novel in which Clara chooses silence over speech after witnessing the violation of her sister by the medical assistant, it is important to examine Clara's situation within the given context. There are various factors to consider. The first is the loss of her elder sister and the suffering that would accompany this experience. For example, her silence could signify grief or simply the inability to express her emotions after such a traumatic event. However as we shall see, this is not the only reason she refuses to speak.

There is also the assault upon Rosa -- with the added taboo of necrophilia -- to consider, "[E]l joven desconocido besó a Rosa en los labios, en el cuello, en los senos, entre las piernas, la lavó con una esponja, le puso su camisa bordada y le acomodó el pelo, jadeando" (45). Few girls happen upon the assault of their sisters in this manner and one cannot help but question the effect of such an experience upon the young subject who viewed it. Perhaps silence would be a relatively benign consequence if we were to compare it with other possible reactions. Not only is her sister dead, and then assaulted, but that violation is committed by a medical assistant, traditionally accepted as an honourable authority figure within the community. Her image of this figure is shattered and reconfigured into one of a bizarre criminal who cannot separate his medical duties from his sexual desires and who uses the authority afforded by his position to indulge his fantasies.

Finally, the violation of Clara's sister leads us to consider the violation of the family home. The private and otherwise secure space of the home is converted momentarily into both operating room and morgue, where doctors take over and death and mourning prevail. It could be argued that perhaps there are cultural considerations in this case and that the

reader should not hasten to judge the practises of other countries in the preparations of their dead. However, one questions whether the child, who for the first time experiences these ceremonies performed in the home, is shocked or simply accepting of the situation. Furthermore, the reader must keep in mind that it was not intended for Clara to see the autopsy as she prowls around on tiptoe during the night to observe the goings-on in the house that evening. Thus, she is forced to face the realization that home may not always be a protective space.

When we consider these elements in conjunction with Clara's subsequent silence, the reader's global impression and understanding of her silence are deepened because, as Laurence points out, "Given the ambiguity of silence as a communicative sign, the social context sometimes helps to determine the interpretation." Indeed it is the active participation of the reader who connects the silence first to the events which preceded it, then to the social and historical context in which those events occurred and finally to the relationship between the characters, that is crucial to the overall understanding of the silence. We are led to conclude that silence itself is inseparable from the events that caused it, the subject who adopts it and the reader who understands it.

The Semiotics of Silence

In *Speech and Phenomena* (1973), Jacques Derrida postulates that, "Hearing oneself speak is not the inwardness of an inside that is closed upon itself; it is the irreducible openness in the inside; it is the eye and the world within speech" (86). Like Bakhtin, Derrida is referring here to words, in this case the spoken word as one hears oneself enunciate them. And the

multiplicity he refers to in this case is exactly the same multiplicity that becomes evident through active reading of silence in a text. The more one delves into the context and the more one recognizes the indeterminacy of silence, the more it becomes evident that it cannot be reduced cleanly and neatly into simply an absence of words. Moreover, after consideration of the French philosopher's words, one is led to challenge traditional, preconceived ideas about silence as simply the absence of anything and to view it rather as having multiple and indeterminate possibilities of implicit expression. Thus it can be "read" as a text can be read.

Kane goes so far as to state that nonverbal communication (remembering the premise that not speaking does not necessarily mean not communicating) can be a powerful tool when attempting to express what words will sometimes not allow one to do:

Whereas ambiguity, indistinctness, and opacity are generally considered liabilities of discursive symbolism, impeding communication, they are the assets that render nonverbal symbolism a perfect medium for revealing the multiplicity of human responses antithetic to time, place and clarity. (14)

It is this "multiplicity of human responses" that leads us to posit silence as signifier whose signified is at least partially determined by the reader's understanding of the context in which it occurs, along with knowledge of cultural and social considerations that may shape how that context is perceived. As we now know, Clara's silence is not simply the acute result of a traumatic event, but rather a decision she consciously makes in response to several factors, some of which have been mentioned in this chapter. It is the reader's awareness of these factors that leads us to more profoundly understand her decision not to speak.

In the novel, silence is chosen by various characters, the majority of whom are female

characters, such as Clara, Blanca and Alba. Each instance of silence as it is connected to these characters is distinctive and has its own significance. For example, young Clara's silence is quite different from that of her granddaughter many years later who voluntarily refuses to speak to the man who rapes and tortures her. Despite the fact that both episodes are narrated by Alba, it is evident that each of these silences is the product of a different set of circumstances. So, while we speak of "silence" in the singular, it is understood that this embraces various possibilities of significance and that each instance must be read individually.

Kane illustrates the many sentiments that silence can express, talking about it as if it were something fluid, that could mould itself to express every facet of human emotion:

The dumb silence of apathy, the sober silence of solemnity, the fertile silence of awareness, the active silence of perception, the baffled silence of confusion, the uneasy silence of impasse, the muzzled silence of outrage, the expectant silence of waiting, the reproachful silence of censure, the tacit silence of approval, the vituperative silence of accusation, the eloquent silence of awe, the unnerving silence of menace, the peaceful silence of communion, and the irrevocable silence of death illustrate by their unspoken response to speech that experiences exist for which we lack the word. (14-15)

It is when we "lack the word" that the reader must rely on his or her own response to the text as a means to uncover its significance. Kane's list of silences is charged with words that evoke an emotional response in the reader, encouraging us to use our own human experience to relate to the ideas the writer tries to convey. Laurence takes it one step further by maintaining that there is almost a contractual relationship between reader and text in which the reader is

responsible for undertaking an active role in the process of understanding “narrative spaces”(59) which “are created in silent dialogue with the reader, who is expected to assume the same active and insightful position as the silent, observing . . . character in fiction” (59).

However, the personal experience of the reader will not always suffice, as Kane realizes. At times, that which is expressed is outside the realm of everyday experiences, and the reader’s imagination and human responses of sympathy and/or empathy are called upon to engage the silence and interpret and understand it:

[. . .] speech, the characterizing signature of humanity, has been superseded by silence to communicate unspoken experience beyond the limitations of human consciousness, such as fear, longing, and death, as well as unspeakable experiences beyond the comprehension of humanity such as the dehumanizing or bestial. (3)

La casa de los espíritus presents the reader with various examples of silence caused by traumatic and/or dehumanizing experiences such as the one previously mentioned in which Clara witnesses the assault of her deceased sister (45), not to mention an episode of domestic abuse years later by her husband, Esteban Trueba, that Clara survives (193). The same man threatens to kill his daughter’s, Blanca’s, lover which induces her to stop talking to her father (192). Later, Blanca’s daughter, Alba, repeats her mother’s silence of loyalty when she will not give up the whereabouts of her boyfriend, Miguel, to Coronel Esteban García, even though the latter tortures and beats her in an attempt to force the information from her. Finally, Amanda, a minor character, dies in jail for protecting the same person, Miguel, who was her younger brother, for the same reason as Alba -- she refused to speak to her torturers

and surrender his location (404).

Each of these examples is linked in some way through the characters, and each one follows the pattern of silence preceded by violence, as outlined earlier. Except in the case of Amanda, who dies, each of the other characters supplants her silence with some form of creative expression, which will be explored later. In the examples mentioned, one notes that each character withdraws into a private, protective, intangible space inside herself which enables her to offer herself and/or others some form of protection from the violence which surrounds her. It is this protective nature of silence which will be explored in the next chapter, as we endeavour to investigate how the characters use silence to distance themselves, if only in an indirect way, from violence and to empower themselves so as to survive -- or ensure that others survive, even if they themselves cannot.

Chapter Three

A Space of One's Own¹³: The Reconstruction of Silence

There are two levels on which the silence of the female characters in this novel operates. The first is silence on a personal, individual level. That is to say that each character adopts silence after an episode that provokes it. As mentioned earlier, silence does not exist without impetus. In the case of these characters, that impetus is almost always a violent episode that precedes their silence. It has already been determined that it is impossible to verify why these characters choose silence; we can only acknowledge the pattern of violence, silence and then creation. But it is also important to observe that the choice of each character is separate from the choices of the others. None is forced or coerced into a decision based on the actions of her sister characters.

However, because a pattern can be established and examples from each of the main female characters' lives can be identified, we can also say that there is a collective side to this silence; that the individual experience -- perhaps one of protest -- embraces all who choose silent over spoken communication. This collective silence and the collectively silent acts of creation and protest by women will be explored only once the silence and creativity of the main female characters, Clara, Blanca and Alba have been examined on an individual level. That examination is the purpose of this chapter, and it will follow in a chronological order,

¹³ The title of this chapter takes its inspiration from Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) in which she states that in order to flourish as writers, women need "money and a room of [their] own" (103) -- two privileges men have often held, but women have not. She cites money as being important for freedom, an important ingredient for creativity, and she claims, "Women have had less intellectual freedom than the sons of Athenian slaves" (103).

beginning with Clara and ending with Alba.

Silence as a Social Construct

Before exploring the significant incidences which are the motivation to the characters' silence, let us take a moment to consider the question of women's silence as a social and cultural construct. It has already been noted that positive references to silence can be found in religion. But there also exist numerous examples within the Christian tradition in which silence is a tool used to teach and maintain a woman's obedience in a patriarchal society.¹⁴ For example, in one Biblical passage, Timothy demonstrates that silence is a learned behaviour used to reinforce woman's subservient position in society when he states, "Women are advised to learn silence with all submissiveness: permit no woman to teach or have authority over man; she is to keep silent" (2:11-12).

This learned behaviour is reinforced by Church teachings and societal norms. In the novel, silence is used by the local priest to control his congregation:

Se encontraba en una de esas largas pausas del sermón que el cura, conocedor del efecto de un silencio incómodo, empleaba con frecuencia.... El silencio se hizo denso, el tiempo pareció detenido en la iglesia, pero nadie se atrevió a toser o a acomodar la postura, para no atraer la atención del padre Restrepo.
Sus últimas frases todavía vibraban entre las columnas. (14)

It is evident in this example that silence is not a simple rhetorical device, but is used to impart

¹⁴ Examples from the Christian tradition are used to illustrate this point not only because it is the one which governs the beliefs of the characters in the novel, but is also the one which has primarily shaped the culture and religious traditions of most non-Native South (and North) Americans.

fear into parishioners, as it “becomes dense” and has the power even to stop time. The priest almost seems to relish the threat of hell and everlasting torture implicit in his daunting absence of words. However, his mesmeric power-hold over his congregation is broken during mass one day by young Clara, described by Alba narrating in third person, as being very “precocious” (11):

. . . en medio de la ansiedad y *el silencio*, se escuchó con toda nitidez la voz de su pequeña Clara.

-¡Pst! ¡Padre Restrepo! Si el cuento del infierno fuera pura mentira, nos chingamos todos. . . (14)” (My emphasis).

Clara has not only said something unexpected and inappropriate, but more importantly she has broken the imminent silence of the powerful masculine figure -- and the effect it created on his congregation. Besides simply misbehaving, Clara has robbed him of the attention of his public, diverting it away from him and towards herself. Father Restrepo cannot tolerate this kind of behaviour and retorts with rage as he yells at her, “¡Endemoniada! ¡Soberbia endemoniada!” (15)¹⁵ After the priest has once again captured the attention of his congregation, the narration continues with the comment, “Esas palabras del padre Restrepo permanecieron en la memoria de la familia con la gravedad de un diagnóstico y, en los años sucesivos, tuvieron ocasión de recordarias a menudo” (15). It is notable that while the young girl says something shocking, it is the words of the male figure which have a permanent effect on the listeners, thus demonstrating the authority of the words of the Church and its

¹⁵ Note the violence implicit in the priest’s reaction, demonstrated not only by the words he chooses but also by the forceful use of exclamation.

patriarchal system. Clara is never again described as precocious.

Sociologist Ron Thorne-Finch notes the difference in the social conditioning which teaches boys to speak and girls to remain silent, "For girls . . . there was a powerful cultural impediment that restricted their freedom to speak. Girls had to be 'nice'. Many words that were quite acceptable coming out of a boy's mouth were forbidden for a girl" (34).¹⁶ In the above example, Clara embarrasses herself because she shows herself to be an ill-mannered and coarse child. She swears in church, swears while speaking to a priest, interrupts the priest during his sermon, questions his authority with her statement and expresses the "unthinkable" (or perhaps what other parishioners are thinking, but would never dare to say.) In short, Clara breaks all the rules of proper and acceptable social Christian conduct. The fact that she breaks them in church simply serves to make matters worse.

The literary critic, Deborah A. Castillo, confirms Thorne-Finch's argument. She notes that silence imposed from the outside can be used as a weapon against women to make them submit to their fathers, brothers and husbands, "Constrained by the absolute requirement of ignorance as a condition of goodness and suitability for married life, [a woman] is unable to imagine a circumstance in which the silence may be broken" (37). In her late youth, Clara shows that she has learned this "obedient" silence when, during her own engagement party, she is quiet, but she does not listen to the priest as he speaks, "Un sacerdote pequeño e inocente, adornado con sus paramentos de misa mayor, leyó el enmarañado sermón que había

¹⁶ Thorne-Finch's use of the past tense here could be understood as including the present. (His study was published in 1992.) One basic premise of his argument is that such social conditioning has always existed in Western society and that now is the time to change it.

preparado, exaltando confusas e impracticables virtudes. Clara no le escuchó . . .” (92). Even though in this instance she seems preoccupied by the whereabouts of the family dog Barrabás, the example also serves to illustrate that she has lost her faith in the value of the spoken word, especially ones uttered by priests.¹⁷

While the Church disapproves of Clara’s spoken words, her family just seems to ignore them. This is shown in the episode in which Clara, still a young child, announces that there will be a death in the family: “‘Pero será un muerto por equivocación,’ dijo. El sábado pasó mala noche y despertó gritando. La Nana le dio una infusión de tilo y nadie le hizo caso. . .” (32). Despite the fact that she reinforces her words with screams in the middle of the night, still no one pays any attention until her sister, Rosa, dies less than twenty-four hours after Clara’s prediction. Thus, Clara as a young character learns the consequences of not obeying societal rules governing social conduct and silence, and she also learns that words spoken by women are fit only to be punished or ignored.

Taking Control: The Appropriation of Silence

It has been established that Clara actively and consciously chooses silence in favour of speech and that there were various possible factors which contributed to her decision. The criteria that we have already explored dealt with trauma or violence outside of her control. It could be argued that the act of choosing not to speak is a way for the subject to recuperate

¹⁷ It appears that Clara’s feelings towards the Church are ambivalent. With the exception of her outburst during mass when she is a child, the reader is never made aware of any other strong negative feelings towards the Church. On the other hand, she maintains a strong connexion to the world of spirits, a pursuit that is seemingly detached from any other religious or spiritual beliefs.

some of the control that she has lost. That is to say, while she could not control the death of her sister -- though she did try, by informing the family of her premonition of a death in the family (32) -- she can, and does, control how and when she uses her voice to communicate with the world.

Clara also uses silence as a form of self-protection from pain and/or violence. Esteban was no stranger to Clara's practise of using silence as a means to fortify herself against pain. As he notes when she suffers nausea and general fatigue during one of her pregnancies, "Entró en uno de sus largos períodos de silencio, creo que le duró varios meses, durante los cuales se servía de la pizarrita, como en los tiempos de la mudez . . . [yo] había llegado a comprender que el silencio era el último inviolable refugio de mi mujer" (112). Esteban remarks that the silence "le duró . . ." indicating that silence here is the subject, the active participant, and his wife is the object, the recipient of that action. He has not understood that silence is a choice for his wife.

Little did he know that some years later, his wife would once again take refuge in her own silence, but at that time it would be to evade the pain inflicted upon her by his physical abuse. Agosin notes that Clara uses silence during both her youth and her maturity, as a way of escaping the pain she experiences due to (masculine?) forces outside her: "Clara se adentra en sí misma, donde desde pequeña se refugia contra las acusaciones del 'poder' autoritario. . . . En la madurez, Clara utilizará el silencio para refugiarse en contra de la violencia de su esposo Esteban Trueba" (451).

Indeed, the second most significant period of silence in this character's life occurs years later, when she is a mature woman. Again, the silence is a conscious act. As mentioned,

this time it is used as a method to protect herself from her abusive husband after a scene in which he beats her, knocking out her front teeth, “Clara no volvió a hablar a su marido nunca más en su vida. Dejó de usar su apellido de casada y se quitó del dedo la fina alianza de oro que él le había colocado más de veinte años atrás, aquella noche memorable en que Barrabás murió asesinado por un cuchillo de carnicero” (193). Clara has discovered that not only can silence be used to create a safe mental/spiritual/emotional space in which she can write freely, as she does regularly in her notebooks, but has further employed silence as a means of freeing herself from Esteban’s power over her. He may batter her, but he cannot force her to speak and enter the masculine/patriarchal realm which he controls.

One can wonder that if Clara denies him power to her dialectical space,¹⁸ is she also symbolically denying him free access to other, more physical feminine spaces? This would certainly appear to be the case, as Esteban explains a few pages before the episode in which Clara stops speaking to her husband forever:

Un día Clara hizo poner un pestillo a la puerta de su habitación y no volvió a aceptarme en su cama, excepto en aquellas ocasiones en que yo forzaba tanto la situación que negarse habría significado una ruptura definitiva. Primero pensé que tenía alguno de esos misteriosos malestares que dan a las mujeres de vez en cuando, o bien la menopausia, pero cuando el asunto se prolongó

¹⁸ Dialectical space in this context is defined as that intangible space within which Clara explores her own opinions, inquires into the logic or senselessness of events that take place and recognizes the truth about the reality in which she lives. It has already been determined that one does not necessarily stop communicating when one is silent. Perhaps it should also be understood that one does not cease to dispute or ponder the hows and whys of one’s existence, but rather that one simply chooses to keep the discourse internal rather than externalizing it through dialogue with an(O)ther.

por varias semanas, decidí hablar con ella. Me explicó con calma que nuestra relación matrimonial se había deteriorado y por eso había perdido su buena disposición para los retozos carnales. Dedujo naturalmente que si no teníamos nada que decimos, tampoco podíamos compartir la cama, y pareció sorprendida de que yo pasara todo el día rabiendo contra ella y en la noche quisiera sus caricias. (173)

This passage is narrated by Esteban, who uses words charged with violent overtones such as “forzaba” and “una ruptura definitiva.” At first, he attempts to rationalize his wife’s silence and withdrawal as being “alguno de esos misteriosos malestares que dan a las mujeres de vez en cuando, o bien la menopausia”. This perception is an obviously superficial interpretation of his wife’s silence based on patriarchal, and possibly even *machista*, values and an unwillingness to admit that his actions (and personality?) are at least partly at fault. It is not until she can *logically justify* her actions to him that he can begin to accept her reasons.

It is difficult to refute the empowerment Clara gains from her silence. She creates a parallel between her dialectical space and her mental/physical/emotional spaces and refuses her husband access to both. The bolt on her bedroom door provides protection of her physical spaces -- her bedroom and her body -- while her silence acts as the barrier to her intangible spaces of mind and spirit. She retreats to find protection and peace from the pain which she must face (or be defaced by) from outside (masculine) forces. Moreover, she has the fortitude and lucidity to explain the situation to her husband “con calma” and use logic to “deducir” that the relationship has deteriorated. She counters his image of her as a hysterical female (to revisit Cixous’ concept of the hysterical and silent woman, as mentioned in the Introduction

to this study), with one of her as a rational human being who thinks matters through (presumably in silence) to arrive at the most coherent and legitimate conclusions.

Thus, we can see that Clara has discovered one can withdraw from the world -- physically and verbally -- to evade oppression and pain, an idea explored by Deborah Castillo, who discusses the manner in which women in general can appropriate silence and use it for their own means:

A woman who is neither passive nor accepting may yet preserve the advantages of distance and silence for her own reasons, using distance to her advantage, using the mask of silence to slip away. Silence, once freed from the oppressive masculinist-defined context of aestheticized distance and truth and confinement and lack, can be reinscribed as a subversive feminine realm. (40)

It becomes evident that Clara shelters herself in her own personal refuge, but by doing so, she actively rejects her husband and his obsession to control and dominate. With regard to this episode, Swanson comments that, "The second silence. . . is not so much a retreat as an act of rebellion" (228). This rebellion is also symbolized when she permanently removes her wedding band (193), thus demonstrating that she is not a merely passive creature seeking to avoid pain, but one who simply refuses to engage in a power struggle defined by masculine privilege.

But Swanson's comment also leads back to the idea of the multiple meanings of silence. Clara's silence can be referred to as a "retreat" or a "rebellion," but neither of these words will suffice, as words such as "empowerment" and "protection" are also appropriate descriptors. However, it becomes clear that there is an inversion of the stereotypical approach

which equates a lack of voice with a lack of power. Laurence observes that women can use silence to criticize the same system that imposes it upon them: “[Women's] silences include but are not limited to a critique of patriarchy. Silence also points to the limitations of language, in general, and Western notions of presence and absence, writing and knowledge in particular” (40). In this novel, it would appear that silence is presented as an alternative form of power, one used generally by marginalized characters (such as women) as a reaction against the patriarchal power structure or the men who represent it.

While Clara uses silence as a means of protection (among other things), her daughter and granddaughter repeat the pattern. As with the eldest of the Trueba women, Blanca's and Alba's silences are also preceded by violent episodes. However, in their cases, their silence serves to protect others rather than themselves, and they suffer for their actions.

While one of Clara's periods of silence is the result of Esteban's beating, so it is with her daughter, Blanca. Alba narrates the episode in which Esteban finds out that his daughter has been leaving the house at night to conduct an affair with someone and subsequently tries to beat the name of the man out of her:

Al ver a su hija, Esteban Trueba no pudo contener su mal carácter y se le fue encima con el caballo y la fusta en el aire, la golpeó sin piedad, propinándole un azote tras otro, hasta que la muchacha cayó y quedó tendida inmóvil en el barro. Su padre saltó del caballo, la sacudió hasta que la hizo volver en sí y le gritó todos los insultos conocidos y otros inventados en el arrebato del momento.

- ¡Quién es! ¡Dígame su nombre o la mato! - le exigió.

- No se lo diré nunca - sollozó ella. (192-193)

Esteban eventually gives up beating her, but only because he believes she has inherited his own stubbornness (192). This may be the case, but equally strong is the argument that, like her mother, Blanca has learned to use silence for her own purposes. She shows this by the forcefulness of the words she uses against her father. Esteban wants two things: to know who Blanca's lover is and to force her to succumb to him by speaking. However, if she speaks and reveals her lover's whereabouts, her father will attempt to find him so that he can kill him. Her act of speaking would lead to a violent death for Pedro Tercero. Thus her words may be correlated with the death of her lover. So Blanca decides against more violence and against death, and favours silence as she accentuates her promise not to tell, to keep her vow of silence, by the use of the double negative, "*No se lo diré nunca*" (193, my emphasis).

Blanca's silence protects her lover, possibly saving his life. This is also the case with her daughter, Alba, the youngest of the Trueba women. When Alba is brutally confronted by her illegitimate uncle and torturer, Esteban García, she refuses to speak:

- Por última vez, Alba. ¿Dónde está Miguel? - preguntó García.

Ella negó silenciosamente. Le habían sujetado la cabeza con otra correa.

- Cuando estés dispuesta a hablar, levanta un dedo - dijo él

- Yo manejo la máquina - dijo.

Y entonces ella sintió aquel dolor atroz que le recorrió el cuerpo y la ocupó completamente y que nunca, en los días de su vida, podría llegar a olvidar. Se hundió en la oscuridad. (387)

Alba, like her mother, Blanca, before her, remains silent despite various and grotesque methods to break her. She survives the violence in silence, but unlike her mother, Alba's case includes rape, the violation of her physical space by the same man who is trying to force her to speak. In this respect, Alba shares something in common with her grandmother, who also holds strong and refuses the male access to her dialectical space, despite his unwelcome intrusion into her physical and sexual space.

Clara, who carefully justifies herself to her husband, and Blanca, who belligerently defies her father, both use words to announce their silence, their protection of self or others. Alba does not. She does not enter the masculine world of words to tell her torturer she will not speak to him. She announces her position and her intent to protect her lover by seemingly ignoring her torturer, by refusing to engage in dialogue with him.

As has been shown, each of the women's silences signifies a conscious decision not to be conquered by the power the male subject holds over them. It is this strength to which Laurence refers when she asserts, "Women's silence . . . can also be read as resistance, as a ritual of truth, as a keeping of silence about something, and as a refusal to enact a subordinate position" (58). It is clear that all three female characters are defiant survivors of violence, as have been many female subjects outside the realm of fiction. They shroud themselves in silence to protect themselves or others. It is a conscious and voluntary act which serves to create an inner space to which the oppressor does not have access. In this way, the female subject re-inscribes the concept of silence, giving it, and themselves, a renewed sense of power. This enables her to rebel against traditional paradigms of power and to challenge traditions of female submission to masculine authority in Western society.

Critics such as Lucas Dobrian have commented on the relationship between Clara's silence and her empowerment, insisting that it is because Clara *chooses* silence that she gains power:

Sin embargo, se ha notado que la mudez no es algo fisiológico que le pase a Clara, sino que representa una decisión consciente por su parte. Es decir, el silencio forma un discurso subversivo que la joven elige activamente. La falta de voz aquí no significa impotencia; más bien, representa, igual que la página en blanco, la palabra en potencia, un texto para escribir. De esta manera, Allende invierte un estereotipo negativo, la mujer asociada con la ausencia del ser y de la palabra, en una potencialidad positiva. Si el espacio de la escritura está en blanco, la mujer puede (re)construirse e inscribir su propio discurso.

(317)

The idea of “una potencialidad positiva” offers the possibility of a creative power which, in this case, is realized through writing. Clara inverts the traditional idea of silence imposed externally and as one relating to a lack of power, obedience and subservience, into a form of inner dialogue¹⁹ in which she chooses to relate to the world around her in written form. She begins this practise at a young age and continues it throughout her life, especially during periods of silence.

Agosin supports the idea that Clara's silence is a form of empowerment, an active role

¹⁹ The word “dialogue” has been used here intentionally. While generally it is accepted that if there is no exchange what occurs is a monologue, in this case, Clara does still communicate with the world around her through notes and her diaries which are later read by Alba. The fact that she does not speak, does not exclude the possibility of a communicative transaction between Clara and other characters.

which the character assumes in order to both write and rebel:

el silencio de Clara existe como una decisión, un acto consciente de enmudecer. Pero la mudez no queda rezagada a la incomunicación, sino que postula la comunicación de escribir, para dar testimonio e inaugurar una tradición que podrá ser rescatable. La segunda metáfora relativa a esta estética del silencio indicaría que mientras Clara enmudece, ella escribe y lee, desafiando el silencio exterior, que es el silencio impuesto por una sociedad poco tolerante de las anomalías. (450)

In short, Clara creates a dialectical space of her own, one inside of herself, in which she can freely explore, create and express her own history (or perhaps better said as “herstory”) and her own text. In turn, Blanca and Alba do the same. Each one inverts traditional norms of feminine silence and empowers herself to survive the violence she cannot control. Each finally regains a sense of control by insisting upon her own inner space of silence which, as Lucas Dobrian says, is a “potencialidad positiva” – a potential that each woman realizes through an alternative, and artistic, means.

Thus far, silence has been correlated to violence in the case of each of the three main female characters. Examples of the kind of violence each survives and how each uses silence in order to protect herself or someone close to her are given. Critics such as Agosin confirm that the characters actively make the choice not to speak and by doing so, they defy the silence imposed from outside while re-inscribing it for their own purposes. This empowerment is expressed creatively by each character through such acts as writing, sculpting or needlework. It is this creative expression which will be examined in the following chapter.

Chapter Four

Mute Creation: Silence and Artistic Creation in the Novel

After discussing silence, as it is related to violence and creation, we turn our attention to the last element in the argument: artistic creation. Marjorie Agosín postulates that, “En *La casa de los espíritus*, el silencio es una forma de escapar . . . para refugiarse en el único espacio posible: la imaginación” (451). While matrilineage unites the principal female characters of the novel and their voluntary silences both protect and empower them, they also have in common the practise of undertaking artistic pursuits during or after their silences. As in chapter three, each principal character in the novel will be studied individually, in chronological order.

Artistic Creation as Communication

If we concede that artistic creations (including writing) can be a form of communication as well as an imaginative expression of the self, we can agree with Lucas Dobrian, who asserts that creation is also a form of empowerment:

. . . cada mujer tiene el poder de la escritura, la cual se manifiesta no sólo en el papel, sino también metafóricamente en otras materias, como bordados y cerámicas. Los textos de las mujeres alternan entre la escritura imaginaria y la testimonial. Mediante la escritura imaginaria cada una de ellas alcanza lo más profundo de su ser, creándose y expresándose de una manera propia.
(314-315)

Lucas Dobrian recognizes that these are marginalized characters, each one finding an artistic

“space of her own” in which she can work. That space would not be only the creative mental space, but also the other medium used by the creator. For Clara and Alba, that artistic space is the blank page. For Rosa, Clara’s elder sister, it is a large piece of cloth, which she tirelessly embroiders, despite disapproving looks from her father:

Entretanto, lo aguardaba sin aburrirse, imperturbable en la gigantesca tarea que se había impuesto: bordar el mantel más grande del mundo. Comenzó con perros, gatos y mariposas, pero pronto la fantasía se apoderó de su labor y fue apareciendo un paraíso de bestias imposibles que nacían de su aguja ante los ojos preocupados de su padre. (13)

Alba, who narrates this passage, indicates that Rosa seemingly takes the task on voluntarily. Despite the fact that it is a “tarea,” it is a self-imposed chore, as the reflexive use of the verb “se había impuesto” indicates. Rosa also performs her task “sin aburrirse,” indicating that she does not find the task tiresome. On the contrary, her cloth and needle empower her to explore her imaginative abilities and sew creatures that are the creation of her mind. She welcomes the task of sewing to liberate her from the mundane and the banal as she allows her creative ability to flourish and exercise her imagination.

One notes that it is the masculine authority figure who does not understand Rosa’s passion for creation, at least as Alba, who narrates this passage, implies. According to her, Severo views his daughter’s pastime as useless and frivolous, while the mother-figure appreciates and encourages her daughter’s artistic endeavours:

Severo consideraba que era tiempo de que su hija se sacudiera la modorra y pusiera los pies en la realidad, que aprendiera algunos oficios domésticos y se

preparara para el matrimonio, pero Nívea no compartía esa inquietud. Ella prefería no atormentar a su hija con exigencias terrenales, pues presentía que Rosa era un ser celestial, que no estaba hecho para durar mucho tiempo en el tráfico grosero de este mundo, por eso la dejaba en paz con sus hilos de bordar, y no objetaba aquel zoológico de pesadilla. (13)

Despite the fact that her mother does not quite understand the “zoological nightmare” her daughter has created, she recognizes the value of her daughter’s creative and imaginative abilities. By allowing her to explore this aspect of her development, Nívea protects her from the social constraints that will take over once Rosa grows up, is married and is forced to set her creative talents aside in order to perform her duties as a wife and mother. (At this point, Nívea, is unaware that her daughter will never reach that point in her life).

Although the character of Rosa is presented to the reader as “celestial,” without social consciousness and ignorant of political concerns, the reader is reminded once again of the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, those real female figures who protested the disappearance of friends, lovers and family members by walking silently around the plaza and wearing the kerchiefs they had hand-embroidered with the names of the disappeared. While Rosa is allowed by her mother to resist the masculine figure who would rather see her preparing to become a good wife, the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo also show resistance against patriarchal forces, but on a larger scale.

Like her elder sister, Clara also utilizes a needle and thread or yarn, as much as a pen and paper, to create. She could “aprender a tejer que, de todas las artes domésticas, fue la única que pudo dominar” (81). One notes in this example that these activities are designated

“las artes domésticas,” rather than the *“oficios domésticos”* to which her father was referring before, indicating that there is a certain amount a creativity and self-expression on the part of the creator. Furthermore, the *“oficios”* would often have to do with chores such as keeping the house clean, looking after the children, etc. These tasks are performed as part of the woman’s duties as wife and mother and will be evaluated, silently or otherwise, by her husband, her family and her peers. The *“arte”* on the other hand, is seen as less useful because it does not contribute directly to the daily running of the household. Nor will the *“arte”* be used as a meter-stick to measure how good the woman is as a mother or wife. As Severo’s reaction shows, the *“arte”* can be the woman’s pastime, but it should never interfere with the *“oficios.”*

As Nivea understood her daughters’ passion to create, so Clara understood her own daughter’s art. Blanca, who had begun to mold ceramic figures in her adolescence, gives it up after her marriage to Jean de Satigny (supposedly to focus on her new *“oficios domésticos”*). It is her mother who encourages her to return to her craft:

Clara le sugirió, en una de sus cartas, que para tener las manos ocupadas, volviera a sus Nacimientos. Ella lo intentó. Se hizo mandar la arcilla especial que estaba acostumbrada a usar en Las Tres Marias, organizó su taller en la parte posterior de la cocina y puso un par de indios a construir un horno para quemar las figuras de cerámica. (242)

In this case it is one feminine subject encouraging the other not to surrender that creative power within herself simply to endeavour to conform to societal expectations of a good wife. The elder subject recognizes a value in this creation that the younger has not yet realized.

Moreover, Clara makes her plea by means of her own artistic expression -- her writing -- thus reinforcing the significance of asserting one's ability to express oneself independently through creative means.

However, Blanca does not yet possess the maturity and mettle of her mother to create despite the criticism of her husband. She does try to return to her craft, but gives up after her husband derides her work: "Pero Jean de Satigny se burlaba de su afán artístico, diciendo que si era para mantener las manos ocupadas, mejor tejía botines y aprendía a hacer pastelitos de hojaldre. Ella terminó por abandonar su trabajo..." (242). Jean de Satigny's words to Blanca have the same effect as Padre Restrepo's words did upon young Clara: they prohibit her from expressing herself freely and belittle and insult her as a human being. The effect is destructive and negative. Both female characters withdraw into themselves: Clara into verbal silence and Blanca into artistic silence.

And just as Padre Restrepo continued on with his own words after silencing Clara's, Jean de Satigny continues his own "artistic" endeavours after Blanca has been ridiculed into giving up hers. A dichotomy is established between the purity implicit in the religious nature of Blanca's "Nacimientos" (which she sacrifices to become more pleasing to her husband) and his clandestine pornographic photographs taken in a secret studio in the house, featuring the Native servants of the household as subjects and which are described as "desordenadas y tormentosas" (247). Jean de Satigny would rather lose his wife than give up his "art," and so he does, as a disillusioned Blanca returns to the family home, leaving her husband forever.

Once freed from masculine ridicule, Blanca returns to her sculpting with renewed passion and purpose. But it is no longer simply a form of self-expression or diversion. She

uses it as a means to support herself financially as she sells her figures and gives classes in figure-making (225). Blanca, like her mother, ultimately refuses to succumb to negative masculine influences as she reclaims her art by making it her refuge, her rebellion against the dissolution (and disillusion) of her marriage and the source of a new, more independent life.

Just as Clara encouraged her daughter to express herself through creative means, so she encourages her granddaughter.²⁰ After being tortured by García, Alba eagerly awaits death to save her from her agony as she is locked in cramped solitary confinement quarters. It is then that Clara encourages her granddaughter through a dream:

[Alba] trató de no respirar, de no moverse, y se puso a esperar la muerte con impaciencia. Así estuvo mucho tiempo. Cuando casi había conseguido su propósito, apareció su abuela Clara, a quien había invocado tantas veces que la ayudara a morir, con la ocurrencia de que la gracia no era morirse, puesto que eso llegaba de todos modos, sino sobrevivir, que era un milagro Clara trajo la idea salvadora de escribir con el pensamiento, sin lapiz ni papel, para mantenerse la mente ocupada, evadirse de la perrera y vivir. Le sugirió, además, que escribiera un testimonio que algún día podría servir para sacar a luz el terrible secreto que estaba viviendo . . . (391)

At the beginning of this scene, silence and death share the same space in Alba's thoughts. She resigns herself to death, the ultimate silence. But this would be giving in to her torturer and the patriarchy he represents. Instead, she is inspired by her grandmother, and commits herself

²⁰ Though it could be argued whether Clara actually does contact Alba directly or Alba simply imagines it, the effect of the matriarchal influence on the creativity of the younger subject is the same.

not only to surviving, but equally important, to writing her story down, so that it too may survive and not be forgotten.

The idea of writing “sin lapiz ni papel” is only the first step for Alba. Later, her *compañeras* in prison find her both paper and pencil so that Alba can write down the events that have happened:

Ana Día me consiguió un cuaderno escolar y me lo regaló.

- Para que escribas, a ver si sacas de adentro lo que te está pudriendo, te mejoras de una vez y cantas con nosotras y nos ayudas a coser - me dijo.

. . . Poco a poco empecé a hacerlo. (405)

From this quotation it can be seen that Alba is not the only one who partakes in creative activities to occupy her time and help her survive. The other women sing and sew to express themselves, to help themselves to survive and to remind themselves that they are not alone in their struggle. They resist succumbing to the masculine order, and they demonstrate collectively, expressing and empowering themselves as their voices rise above those of the military:

Las mujeres se pasaban el día cantando a voz en cuello. Los carabineros les golpeaban la pared.

- ¡Cállense, putas!

- ¡Háganos callar, si pueden, cabrones, a ver si se atreven! - y seguían cantando más fuerte y ellos no entraban, porque habían aprendido que no se puede evitar lo inevitable. (405)

The women find strength in each other, in their collective and in their creation of song. Together they break the silence and express themselves, empowering themselves against the coarse, but ambivalent soldiers who guard them.

Alba's creative expression through testimonial writing is closely connected with two equally important points: the first, from the micro-view of the novel itself, is the connection with her grandmother's practise of writing and its implications within the novel; the second, examining at with the macro-sociopolitical view, deals with Alba as a character representative of a collective of female characters who are survivors of torture and political turmoil, who actively create to maintain their collective consciousness and memory and to survive their ordeal, and who are arguably representative of the real Chilean women who survived the *coup d'état* and its aftermath.²¹ These two points, the micro-view of the novel and the macro-sociopolitical view, will be explored in the next chapter.

²¹ Alicia Partnoy, an Argentinean who, at the age of 21, became "disappeared" during the Dirty War in Argentina wrote her testimonial book *The Little School: Tales of Disappearance and Survival in Argentina* to share her experience and pay tribute to "a generation of Argentines lost in an attempt to bring social change and justice" (18).

Chapter Five

“Pen is Envy”²²: Reclaiming Power Through Writing

This chapter focuses on Alba’s varied roles as witness, testimonial writer, narrator, and transcriber of her grandmother’s text. It examines the significance of the character’s responsibility not only for telling and preserving her own story, but in addition, for keeping her grandmother’s *cuadernos* and writings. Alba is a crucial character in the novel not only because she is the last of the Trueba women to survive and the first to be part of a conscious collective of female survivors, but also because her role in the novel is quite complex. While Alba is a character, she is also one of the writers, narrators and editors of the final text.²³ Alba writes her own testimony, but then combines it with the text of her grandmother’s *cuadernos* (and partial verbal narration of her grandfather) to create a more in-depth, well-rounded story that reflects the experiences of three generations.

Vicente Cabrera notes that, “Alba es la historiadora, es la voz que articula el texto—o textos — de los hechos” (38). When one considers Alba’s role as a historian, as Cabrera has, it is logical that she would turn to primary sources, such as her grandmother’s written diaries

²² Taken from Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* in which certain female characters are not allowed to read or write and are warned that “Pen is envy,” thus indicating that even holding a pen is equal to one of the seven deadly sins. At one point, the main character, Offred, during a clandestine visit with a commander, holds a pen and momentarily feels empowered, “The pen between my fingers is sensuous, alive almost, I can feel its power, the power of the words it contains” (174).

²³ While the reader recognizes that all of these “texts” written by Alba and Clara are fictitious, the narrative technique used by Allende to have Alba pose as both writer and narrator is worthy of exploration. Allende writes in such a way that we are led to suspend our disbelief and imagine that perhaps the story told was indeed “written” by one of the fictitious characters.

and her grandfather's testimony, to reconstruct the events of the past. Indeed, Alba seems conscious of her role as chronicler and aware of the fact that she must rely on sources other than her own past and memory to tell her story. One example of this awareness occurs when she speaks of her uncle Jaime's and Nicholas' sexual escapades during their youth and clarifies, "Clara nunca lo supo, de modo que no pudo anotarlo en sus cuadernos para que yo lo leyera algún día. Me enteré por otros conductos" (126). Alba does not elaborate on what these "otros conductos" are, but she does acknowledge that the information does not come from her grandmother's diaries.

Plagiarism or Liberation? The Question of the *Cuadernos*

It should be noted that Alba's act of reading the diaries "cincuenta años después"(9), is not an invasion into the private world and thoughts of her grandmother so much as it is a liberation of an almost-lost text. By dusting off the *cuadernos* and bringing them up from the basement, and by sharing their contents with the reader and at last allowing her grandmother's voice to be heard, Alba ensures that her grandmother's story is passed on. In doing so, Alba becomes both reader and interpreter of these texts, and she gives voice to her grandmother's silence.

At no point in the novel does the reader have access to the text of the "original" diary. With the exception of the opening line (which is also the closing line) of the novel, there are no direct excerpts or quotations that are noted as such. There are no inserts of pages from this other "text". The reader's access to the text is completely mediated by Alba. While a case could be made for criticizing Allende for not including more quotations from Clara's text to

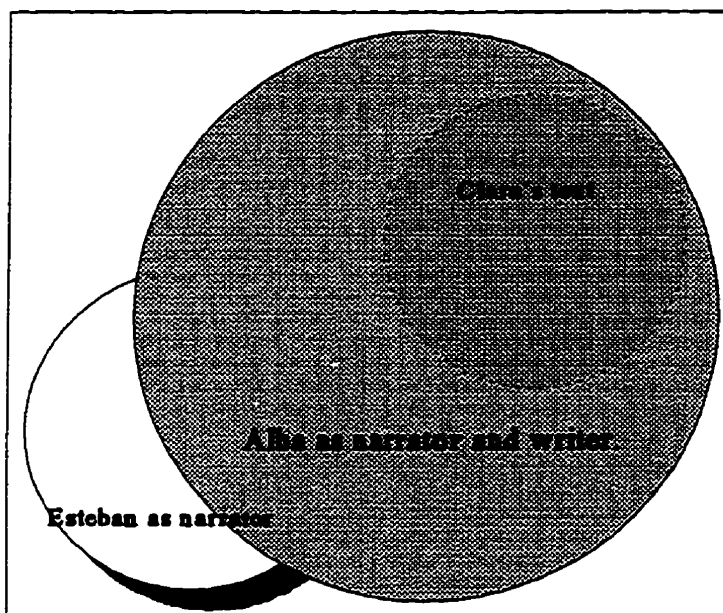
aid the reader's suspension of disbelief and to make Alba's own telling of the story more credible, it should be noted that this "melding" of texts and stories does offer a certain continuity that may well have been broken up by adding another level of fiction (i.e. fictitious quotations, excerpts or page-inserts from a fictitious diary written by a fictitious character) to the structure of the novel.

Alba mentions at the beginning, at the end and throughout her narrative that she has used her grandmother's *cuadernos* and their contents to fill in gaps in her own story and to share information with the reader that she herself could not have known before reading the notebooks. These references serve to increase the reader's suspension of disbelief, add credibility to Alba's story and give due credit to her grandmother's work, thus evading any criticisms of Alba as plagiarizer.

Moreover, the structure of the novel is already quite complex because it has two narrators, Esteban Trueba and Alba, one of whom (Alba) narrates in both first person and third person. The narration is shared almost equally between grandfather and granddaughter, with Alba being the dominant narrator because it is her voice speaking at the beginning and end of the novel and it is she who is established as the overall "writer" of the "text"/novel.²⁴ While society has traditionally not allowed women to speak (out) and be heard by O/others, Alba as narrator inverts this stereotype when she is the one controlling the word. She allows the O/other a chance to speak and tell the O/other side of the story. She does not try to silence the male subject in the same way that society has tried to silence women who may

²⁴ For a brief outline of the changes of narrative voice (Esteban Trueba and Alba), see the Appendix.

Alba speak out, but she still mediates, as she is posited as the implied author of the text. Alba's function as narrator and "writer" of the story is essentially an inclusive one. She allows the story to be told from various points of view, each stemming from one of three characters: her grandfather, her grandmother and herself. The roles of the characters could be shown in the



following manner:

Fig 1. Diagram of the narrative structure of *La casa de los espíritus*.²⁵

Figure 1 shows one possible way to envision the narrative structure of the novel: That is to see Esteban as a separate character whose narration is separate from Alba's, insofar as it presents his point of view of the . At the same time, it is mediated by her, as she transcribes

²⁵ Note that the traditional "levels" of narration have not been portrayed as such in this graphic representation of the narrative. This is done intentionally to avoid traditional patriarchal and hierarchical representations. Circles have been chosen partly to avoid this and partly because their roundness is representative of feminine forms.

and possibly interprets what he says. He is independent only in that he speaks in first person.

Clara's text, on the other hand, is completely incorporated into Alba's text and that is why it appears as part of Clara's narration. (The dotted line is intended to show the free access Alba has to her grandmother's text.) Thus, Alba in effect, becomes her grandmother's voice, as she narrates events that she could never possibly have witnessed (such as her parents life together before she was born), claiming the authority in these cases due to the fact that she is the sole reader of the diaries.

In a certain way, Alba's mediation of the text could be regarded as a method of bonding between grandmother and granddaughter. We know that Clara turned to writing in her notebooks after her spoken words were devalued by those around her and she became silent. When she did speak, both she -- and her words -- were either ignored, such as when she predicted the death of her sister (32), or chastised, such as when she spoke aloud during Mass (14). Similarly, at the time she wrote them, her diaries were of no interest to anyone.²⁶ Agosín notes that diary writing is "una forma practicada exclusivamente por mujeres desde la época medieval" (454) and that perhaps it is because Clara's diaries were seen as frivolous that they were relegated to the basement of the family home and left there for fifty years. As has been noted in the previous chapter, a distinction is made in the novel between "*las artes domésticas*" and "*los oficios domésticos*," with the "*arte*" being regarded as more frivolous

²⁶ It is difficult to conjecture if Clara had an intended reader or not, but for example, the fact that she refused to allow the repetition of first names in the family because it would cause confusion in her notebooks (114), seems to imply at least a hypothetical reader. Also, Alba leads the reader to believe that *she* was the intended reader of her grandmother's texts: "Clara los escribió *para que me sirvieran* ahora para rescatar las cosas del pasado . . ." (411) (My emphasis).

because it did not pertain to the everyday running of the household. If Clara's diaries were considered as part of the "*arte*" category, it is understandable why other characters (especially male characters, such as Esteban) considered them of little value.

But Clara's diaries are not lost because they are read by Alba, who uses them to help her re-construct her family's history and "sobrevivir a [su] propio espanto" (411). Alba uses her power as a writer to integrate the words of her grandmother into her own narrative, thus preserving both women's stories, testimonies and histories, that is to say, "histories" and "herstories", and at the same time recognizing the value of her grandmother's texts and, symbolically, the value of other "artes domésticas."

Equally important is the fact that the writing of these texts is an act practised by women as marginalized characters without a "voice" to express themselves in society. Each one writes about her trauma and the violent episodes she survived. Thus, violence, marginalization, injustice and writing are closely connected in this novel, as Lucas Dobrian points out, "Mediante Alba, Allende parece sugerir que el poder no siempre se consigue por medio de la violencia, la agresión y la brutalidad. Al contrario, la justicia se logra a veces mediante la comprensión y la palabra que des-cubren la injusticia" (318).²⁷

This act of "dis-covering" injustice is achieved through the writing, not through the silence one has used to survive the violence. Reiterating the pattern of violence-silence-creation, the last step is creation (in this case writing). While silence can be "a positive feature

²⁷ Lucas Dobrian seems to be suggesting that "*el poder*" and "*la justicia*" can be used almost synonymously and can be understood as the personal ability to do certain things, such as reveal injustice and "empower" oneself against larger forces of "power" such as dictatorships or the government.

of women's experience and discourse" (66) as Laurence says, Agosin affirms that the inability to discuss what happened under the military dictatorship is normal. She asserts that it is through writing -- rather than speaking -- that one is able to express oneself:

Through writing, one may be able to exercise pain and neglect, but not torture, because the inexplicable wires that dispassionately launch electrical currents through the bodies of delirious victims cannot be translated into words. What can be put into writing is the fact that the most common elements are the most desired: the aroma of bread and coffee, and the promise of a soft drink on a prisoner's birthday. (*Women of Smoke*, 69)

If one agrees with Castillo and Agosin, the pattern of violence-silence-creation is most certainly comprised of causal relationships, rather than simple correlations of behaviour. If this is the case, the creation undertaken by each character is more than simply a recreational pastime, as the act itself becomes imbued with connotations of courage and survival and inseparable from the events that preceded it.

In the context of the novel then, Alba's act of "liberating" her grandmother's text from the basement serves not only to help her fill in the gaps in her story and help her to survive her own ordeal, but also serve to give voice to her grandmother's silence. The memories are preserved, the story is passed on and the silent tales kept secretly stored are shared so that others may know what has passed.

Chapter Six

Interwoven Meanings: Chilean *arpilleras*

While each of the characters in Allende's work of fiction turn to artistic creation after long periods of silence provoked by some violent episode, there exists a parallel experience for women in Chile who broke their silence by creating *arpilleras*, after the *coup d'etat* in 1973 in that country. The feminist critic and literary and political theorist, Marjorie Agosin, has dedicated various studies to the Chilean *arpilleras* and the social and political significance of their representations. In *Women of Smoke*, she explains that:

Arpilleras are appliquéd wall hangings that are made from leftovers, unused objects, and pieces of thrown-out cloth. Beautiful, detailed tapestries, full of color and sun, are constructed from things that have been discarded. The *arpilleras* project an image that is absolutely clear, and transmit specific messages such as "No More Torture," "Zone of Hunger"²⁸ and "Zone of Pain". (75)

²⁸ Catherine Boyle also notes the connection between the *arpilleras* and hunger / lack of available food during the years of violence in Chile, as she explains how the *arpilleristas* re/represented this in their work:

"Women had, since the mid-1970's, depicted in testimonial tapestries, *arpilleras*, the *olla común*, the common pot, a type of soup kitchen set up by neighborhood organizations, often in collaboration with Church solidarity groups . . . the *olla común* became an integral part of the *arpilleras*, as a standard depiction of diminished resources and the diminished ability of parent to look after and protect their children." (167)



Fig. 2. The production of Chilean *arpilleras* (top row) and completed *arpilleras*. from Marjorie Agosin, *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras* (Toronto, 1987) 68-69.

Agosín weaves references to *arpilleras* into many of her critical works such as her article entitled “Agujas que hablan: las arpilleristas chilenas,” but it is in her book, *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras*, where she goes into the most detail about this art form, establishing herself as one of the few scholars who has published a work exclusively dedicated to the subject. She notes that the history of the *arpilleras* is difficult to trace and may be “very old and widespread” (49). Nonetheless, she points to folklorist Violeta Parra who spoke for the poor and oppressed in songs and in tapestry-work done on burlap (noting that the very word “*arpillera*” means “burlap”) in the 1950s as a possible inspiration for the *arpilleras* of the 1970s (49). She also speculates that brightly-colored embroideries originating from Isla Negra in the 1960s and crafted by wives of fishermen which were later sold to add to the family’s income (49-50) may have influenced the women of the ’70s, who also sold their *arpilleras* to earn money.

However, the *arpilleristas*, individuals and small collectives of women who created the *arpilleras*, united as a group in 1974, the year after the military *coup*. A Catholic organization called “*La Vicaria de la Solidaridad*,” the Vicarate of Solidarity,²⁹ sponsored afternoon workshops in order for women to unite and create the *arpilleras* (Agosín, *Women of Smoke*, 75).³⁰ The *arpilleras* were later sold and the money went back to the women who

²⁹ In *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras*, Agosín states that the Vicarate of Solidarity is “a body of the Church that is concerned with defending human rights and functions under the special protection of the Archbishop, now Cardinal, of Santiago” (3).

³⁰ In *Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras*, Agosín points out that under the Vicarate of Solidarity’s protection, some of these same women united to form the “Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared,” an organization dedicated to finding the truth about what happened to the disappeared in Chile (3, 12), and she later notes that the first twenty members of the Association were *arpilleristas* (44).

had made them to help them support their families.³¹ Boyle notes that the artwork was sold clandestinely, for the most part, and it was “largely invisible within the country, still, in the last years of the dictatorship, hidden underneath counters and only produced for sale on request” (168). Although the *arpilleristas* acted with the blessing of the *Vicaria de la Solidaridad*, they -- and their work -- were not immune to censorship or threats from the military.

Naming and Reclaiming: The Re/creation of Identity

Even though the Church sponsored the workshops in which they were created, the *arpilleras* were seen as subversive, due to the nature of the political and social message that were “woven” into them. When the act of creating a wall hanging -- of sewing -- becomes a subversive one, it ceases to be a simple “*arte doméstica*,” a purely recreational activity, such as the ones mentioned in Allende’s novel (81). As Agosin notes, “The messages transmitted by the *arpilleras* immediately capture the urgency of the women's situations. The women who make *arpilleras* are leading the way in challenging the system by using something purely traditional, needlework, as a weapon that defies silence and the imposed order” (*Women of Smoke* 75).

Before the creation of the *arpilleras*, needles -- the principal tool of needlework -- were used to embroider tablecloths (as Rosa did in the novel), to mend socks, and the like.

³¹ Many women were left as single-parents during the dictatorship due to the fact that their husbands (and brothers, fathers, uncles, etc.) had disappeared. Thus many women were left with the domestic *and financial* responsibilities of maintaining the household and raising the children.

However, once the political situation changes, the women utilize whatever tools they have at hand and know how to use -- in this case, the sewing needle and scraps of fabric - as their weapon against the dictatorship. In this case, they use their tools and skills in their wall hangings to tell an (untold) his/her/story that is a far cry from the official History the military wished to establish. Thus, the domestic and private solitary act of doing needlework becomes politicized as women unite to create the *arpilleras*.

There is a parallelism to be noted here between the real life act of creating *arpilleras* and the act of writing in *La casa de los espíritus*. Clara's act of writing had been an apolitical, personal(ized) and individual endeavour, one much like the needlework done quietly and as a pastime by women before the dictatorship. However with chang/ed/ing political circumstances, Alba -- younger by two generations -- channels her creative abilities to express, reflect upon and rebel against the injustice the dictatorship brings. Unlike her grandmother, Alba's act of writing is not a solitary one. She incorporates the text of her grandmother and also allows her grandfather to tell his story, so that the final product is a collective effort on the part of all three characters to tell the family's his/her/story.

One could argue that the parallelism is flawed because while *arpilleras* are created typically by small groups of women (though each one creates her own *arpillera*), Alba's "collective" includes the masculine influence of her grandfather. While this is true, one counterargument is that within the narrative context of this novel, Allende chooses to include, to portray and to posit the male figure as being as much a victim of circumstance as is the female character who is allowed to tell her story through narration. In this instance, by allowing Esteban's perspective to enter into the story, the narrative gains another dimension,

one which encourages (requires? allows?) a more active reading than a simple linear, univocal narration would have necessitated. Another argument (though a weaker one) is that narration and needlework are different crafts and that the male figure is as capable as the female in this regard.

Notwithstanding these counterarguments, the parallelism between the progression of creation from a solitary, apolitical craft to a collective, highly politicized act done out of a strong social consciousness and an awareness that representing the past is a way to keep it from being forgotten, is evident both in the narrative context of the novel and in the case of the Chilean womens' needlework.

There is also a strong structural parallelism between the *arpilleras* and the novel. As Agosin notes in the very title of her book, *Scraps of Life: Chilean arpilleras*, the wall-hangings were created with small "scraps" or pieces of cloth, along with a burlap background and (usually) brightly colored thread or yarn. The structure of the novel is similar. The various points of view (such as Esteban's and Alba's) along with Clara's diaries are the different pieces or "scraps" from which the story is woven together. Indeed, Alba's role as chronicler and writer requires that she put together the different pieces of the story so that they present a coherent (if not complex) picture to the reader. In effect, Alba's role directly correlates to that of an *arpillerista*. Both use bits of material to tell a story, to preserve memories and to craft something which will endure for generations to come.

Speaking of preserving memories, one way in which the *arpilleristas* chose to represent the past was to embroider on the reverse of each *arpillera* the names of her own friends and family members who disappeared during the years of the dictatorship. This aspect

of the *arpilleras* indicates that behind each social injustice illustrated on the front of the piece - an injustice that affected Chileans collectively -- the personal or individual sufferings were also represented. In other words, although the *arpilleras* were often made by small groups of women, their individual connection to their work and to the war was never forgotten. These women wished to present their collective his/her/stories but they also did not want their “disappeared” to be forgotten. Nor did they want them known as only part of a nameless or faceless collective, but as human beings with names and identities who had families and friends who would remember them. The act of naming each one is an attempt to re-create their lost identities so that they will not be forgotten. Thus the recreational act of needlework also becomes the “re-creational” work of preserving not only their collective his/her/stories, but also of remembering their lost loved ones.

The question of personal identity as it is related to disappearance and torture is one too vast to explore in this project, but it should be noted that the custody, that is to say the “safekeeping” and “maintenance,” of one’s name is inextricably linked to the preservation of one’s identity. Alicia Partnoy, a survivor of disappearance in Argentina notes that:

At the Little School³² I don’t have a last name. Only Vasca [her co-prisoner and friend] calls me by name. The guards have repeatedly said that numbers will be used to call us, but so far that has been just a threat [T]hey have called me Death. Maybe that is why every day, when I wake up, I say to myself that I, Alicia Partnoy, am still alive. (42-43)

³² Partnoy explains that she was imprisoned in a “concentration camp which the military ironically named the Little School (*La Escuelita*)” 14.

By remembering her name, Partnoy retains a sense of identity and individuality in a prison where all captives are treated inhumanely and “could be killed at any moment” (61). Agosin affirms Partnoy’s testimony and notes that, “The soldiers use the tactic of referring to the prisoners by numbers, because a name, even if it is used by a torturer, invokes memories of the voices of mothers, brothers, sisters and teachers, and they know that memory is a powerful tool for survival” (*Women of Smoke* 70).

For the *arpilleristas* – mothers who do remember – the irony is that while they chose to try to preserve the individual identities of their loved ones who had disappeared by embroidering their names on the back of the arpilleras, the artists were in grave danger of becoming disappeared themselves for undertaking such a “subversive” act. As Agosin points out, “Because of the defiance of censorship and the subversive themes represented in the arpilleras, the arpilleras must remain anonymous to protect both themselves and their families” (75). In other words, once the women’s passive “*arte doméstica*” turned political, these women were noticed enough to be considered subversives and regarded as a threat to the dictatorship. Working as part of a collective allowed them to mask their individual identities and the *arpilleristas* relied on the anonymity of these collectives (and, of course, the protection of the Vicarate of Solidarity) to offer them protection. While they named their disappeared, these artists could not or would not sign or otherwise name themselves on their art.

This is one aspect of reality which differs greatly from the novel. In *La casa de los espíritus*, despite the fact that Alba (as narrator) remains anonymous throughout much of the novel, her identity as narrator and writer / creator is ultimately revealed. Moreover, it is not

clear that this anonymity is an attempt to protect herself from the same forces that tortured her and kidnapped her lover, Miguel. At various points in the novel, the anonymous narrator refers to him/herself as “I” (see Appendix), establishing that it is not a collective who speaks, but an individual who names him/herself by the first-person singular subject pronoun. In other words, the “collective” in the novel is not a conscious or overtly stated attempt on the part of the characters to mask the identities of those individuals who unite to narrate a story through artistic creation.

Is this an oversight on Allende’s part? It is difficult to speculate on the reasons why the danger of creating such “subversive art” or of telling one’s story is not represented in the novel. One reason for this perhaps is that, while the *arpilleristas* were living in the reality of the dictatorship and constantly under threat of becoming disappeared themselves, the characters of the novel resided in the comfort of fiction. The creator of this fiction, Allende, unlike the *arpilleristas*, was removed from immediate danger by living in exile when she chose to tell her story.

Dictating the Past: Preserving Memories Through Artistic Creations

Despite the differences mentioned above, both the *arpilleras* and the narration of *La casa de los espíritus* share the purpose of telling a story and preserving the memories of what has passed (and those who have passed on). This is clearly stated in the novel when Alba says:

Mi abuelo tuvo la idea de que escribiéramos esta historia.

- Así podrás llevarte las raíces contigo si algún día tienes que irte de aquí, hijita - dijo. (409)

This quotation not only suggests that one write in order to preserve one's memories, but also addresses the very real question of people -- artists and writers included -- having to leave their homeland and set down "roots" elsewhere, as did Allende herself. This citation suggests that by writing down the past, one can take one's "roots" with them to remember not only events and people, but places as well.

Alba later remarks that her grandmother also wrote to preserve the family's memories:

Mi abuela escribió durante cincuenta años en sus cuadernos de anotar la vida. Escamoteados por algunos espíritus cómplices, se salvaron milagrosamente de la pira infame donde perecieron tantos otros papeles de la familia. Los tengo aquí, a mis pies, atados con cintas de colores, separados por acontecimientos y no por orden cronológico, tal como ella los dejó antes de irse. Clara los escribió para que me sirvieran ahora para rescatar las cosas del pasado y sobrevivir a mi propio espanto. (411)

This preservation of memories is also an important aspect of the *arpilleras*. In *Women of Smoke* Agosin notes that the *arpilleristas* knew of the danger in which they put themselves by crafting their wall hangings, but that they did so in order to maintain the memories of their disappeared and to record a history that represented the world in which they lived, not the one the dictatorship wanted to portray:

[In] the women who make *arpilleras* to record, save and help their loved ones . . . we observe women who, in times of profound social, economic and historical crisis, transform their realities by means of an artistic object. They do not intend to obscure the reality in which they find themselves. On the

contrary, they intend to restore reality and show it to the spectator. By making visible Chile's current reality, they defy the power of the oppressors. (79)

Both the novel and the *arpilleras* serve to tell stories and represent events which were not officially recognized. Creation became (is still?) a manner in which to express oneself when (spoken) words alone are not sufficient, or perhaps, too difficult to express. Boyle notes that, "The *arpillera* became, more than a testimony, the deposit for memory, for ways of expressing and talking about those years, ways of saying without using words" (168). While the principal assertion of this project is that a pattern of violence-silence-creation can be established in the novel, it can also be noted in the situations of the *arpilleristas* and other artists who lived in Chile during the 1970s. They witnessed the violence of the military dictatorship, became silent (due to censorship or fear of the military and/or disappearing themselves) and later began to express those fears, along with other emotions, in their works of art. Thus, in the case of the Chilean women, their silence leads to the production of their *arpilleras*. What they cannot verbalize is expressed through the stories they tell in their art. The *arpilleras*, which include front and back panels and the *appliquéd* pieces on the front, are multi-layered, much like their own stories, which include the personal, familial, political and social layers.

In fact, Boyle goes so far as to argue that the significance of the *arpilleras* does not lay in the fact that they empowered women financially or that they had the protection of the *Vicaria de la Solidaridad* to create them in Church-sponsored workshops; but that their importance remains in the fact that they are -- and will continue to be -- historical remnants of a Chile that was torn apart by military dictatorship:

The *arpilleras* are a store for the memory; the women who make them, the *arpilleristas*, are the guardians of the memory of the *pobladores* in the years when any overt, verbal expression of this memory was disallowed them, and when any real and visible social existence was denied in the interests of the 'tranquillity' of society. (Boyle 167)

The *arpilleras* become, thus, not only an attempt to re-create the identity of the disappeared, whose names were sewn on to the reverse of the wall hangings, but also an effort to re-create and preserve an unofficial history. In other words, if the government tried to shred the fabric of the country and (re)present (fabricate) History as it saw fit, the *arpilleristas* gathered together as a collective with the tools they had at their disposal to patch together a history which would not forget the pain and suffering of their people.

Representations on a Larger Scale

As we have drawn parallels between the work of the female characters of the novel and the *arpilleristas* who wove their own story into burlap sacks, so we have moved from fiction to reality, attempting to show how fiction can represent reality and how, at times, reality tries to re-write / re-present the fiction that certain authorities, such as a dictatorial government, would have as History.

This does not mean that fiction *is* reality or vice versa; rather that they are linked, for, as Gloria Bautista affirms, "La meta del escritor no es copiar la realidad, sino encontrarla, descubriendo así una nueva realidad. . ." (304). It could be said that this goal is not only one of writers, but of other artists as well. As has been established throughout this project, writing

is simply one form of expressing oneself, of telling one's story, be it within the micro-context of the novel, or within the macro-context of society. We have seen how each principal female character in the novel tries to "find" her own reality -- after surviving violence, withdrawing into herself in silence and finally moving on to creative expression through an artistic form. Similarly, we have expanded upon how the Chilean *arpilleristas* tried to dis-cover their own reality through the creation of their wall-hangings.

The *arpilleristas* were not alone in their efforts to preserve the memories of the disappeared or re-present events that happened in their artwork. Other artists have also addressed questions such as the ones Agosin poses in *Women of Smoke*, "Where and how does one express oneself in a country that has been overwhelmed by fear? Where does one take refuge amidst the pain and despair?" (74). The answer, for Agosin, and evidently some of her compatriots, lies not only in the *arpilleras*, but in other "art actions" performed by Chileans during the 1970s. She explains that:

Many unofficial street performances have been achieved in Pinochet's Chile in which an individual places him/herself in the core of a city in crisis. In this way, the city's inhabitants become the central theme of the art. They become the objects and material of a creation that is vital and alive. From this are born what are called "art actions". (75)

She gives the example of the milkmen who stopped traffic in order to distribute milk in the poorest *barrios* of Santiago noting that, "The public observed the trucks, and immediately deciphered the subtle message behind the action: the truck drivers were defying the dictatorship by distributing milk to the poor" (75).

Upon first consideration, one may question what milkmen have to do with writers, or needleworkers or the fictitious characters of Isabel Allende. The above example serves to re-affirm that those who have been censored or choose to live in silence after surviving violence, may -- and will-- consciously use the tools, materials and resources they have at their disposal to express themselves freely. In doing so, they create a "space of their own" -- be it on a page, in a Church workshop or in the public space of the capital of a country -- in which they can re-create / re-present his/her/story - and add to the images of the collective memory which will not be erased by any other version of History.

Conclusions

Tying Up the Loose Ends

Thus we have shown that silence plays an important role in *La casa de los espíritus*, its main function being a refuge for the female characters, a self-imposed sensory asylum from the violence perpetrated by the men around them. The silence forms a shield that the men will not essay. Despite Esteban's threats, and despite his violence toward his wife, Clara, and his daughter, Blanca, when they stop speaking to him and despite his bastard son's, Esteban García's treatment of Alba when she refuses to engage in dialogue with him, the men are weakened by the women's muteness and cannot broach it. This thesis has shown that there is always motivation for silence, and in the novel, that impetus has often been a violent one. Clara's silences were a product of witnessing the assault of her sister and the domestic abuse of her husband. Blanca's most prominent silence was prefaced by a brutal beating by her father. Alba's silence in jail was preceded and punctuated by torture and rape.

Despite its evident importance, this problematic has not been extensively explored in academic investigations or literary criticism of the novel, except in a nominal manner by critics such as Swanson. Rather, the themes of politics, magical realism and matriarchy have been the primary bases for literary dialogue about the novel, since these are the elements which are most obvious upon consideration of this work. Although silence is a significant element in this novel, it is not one that is as overt or conspicuous as the more popular aspects that have been studied. This project has been an attempt to give voice to silence so that it may figure more prominently in scholarly discussions of the work. As has been demonstrated, once one begins to study silence in one context, its function in other contexts becomes evident and relevant.

This is the case with the Chilean *arpilleras* and other art actions, often performed in silence as acts of rebellion and / or survival.

In this project, the efforts to understand and define silence, while certainly not exhaustive, have focused on aspects of silence that are touched upon in the novel, including the spiritual and calming effects of silence, and silence within a literary context. This definition, of course, demands acknowledgement that silence does not exist in a void. Silence is both an event in the narrative and a linguistic sign that can be interpreted and understood as having different meanings, depending upon the context in which it occurs. Like its verbal counterpart, language, it has a context which shapes and defines its meaning.

E. Thomson Shields claims that, "All we have to help us understand the world are words. And words control us, not so much by what they say, but by what they do not say" (85). This concept, while being neatly packaged, embodies the reductionist concept of silence that we have tried to avoid in this study. Of course words can control a subject, but as the principal female characters of the novel clearly demonstrate, one can rebel against words by refusing to enter into the system in which men control both the words and the power. Furthermore, both the characters of this novel and real women such as the *arpilleristas* or the Madres de la Plaza de Mayo have disproved Shield's assertion that, "all we have to help us understand the world are words" (85). It has been demonstrated that not only words (spoken or written) help us understand the world, but so do embroideries, wall-hangings, pottery and other art forms. Speech, as Steiner affirms, is indeed not the only form of communication we use (91).

Silence affects the lives of the three principal female characters when they actively

embrace silence at various points in their lives; these occur during or after violent or traumatic events. They withdraw inside a private space to recuperate. Whereas they cannot control what is being done to their bodies, they affirm the power they have over their dialectical space by refusing to speak, by refusing their aggressors access to their words.

The refuge sought in this quiet space of silence prefaces the women's exploration and expression of themselves and their experiences through some form of artistic creation. After or during her silence, each woman begins to create: to write, to hand-build clay figures, to sing, etc. Thus, a causal relationship between violence, silence and creation can be established within the framework of the novel. The characters reclaim silence, imbuing it with new meaning and new power, a power that cannot be controlled by the male figure. Once the characters have empowered themselves by withdrawing from violence (inflicted by males, who define/or represent patriarchal values), they then proceed on to creation, traditionally -- and biologically -- a female endeavour.

The pattern of violence - silence - creation can not only be identified within the context of this fictional work, but also in real life, as has been demonstrated in the cases of Argentinean Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, the Chilean *arpilleristas* and others who endeavoured to create "art actions", as defined by Agosin. But labelling these actions almost seems to reduce their value. They were indeed artistic and political in nature, but they were more than that. For the *arpilleristas*, their art is also a form of economic sustainment. For the Madres of the Plaza de Mayo, their art is a method of questioning the dictatorship and its actions. For both groups, their art is a method to preserve the past, as the women who create and protest in silence become historians who refuse to forget what has occurred in their

countries and will not falter in their objective to question what the government has done to their disappeared loved ones.

The art, like the silence, is redefined by the women who create it and infuse it with new (politicized) meaning. The women use the tools, materials and resources available to distance themselves from destructive forces based on patriarchal values and to re-inscribe themselves and their art. These creations serve not only to tell a story, but also to preserve a history. In the case of the embroidered kerchiefs of Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo and the *arpilleras*, the art is also an attempt to re-create and preserve the identities of loved ones who have disappeared under military dictatorship. The art will outlive its creator(s) and will serve as attestations for future generations, just as Clara's text served as testimony for Alba.

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Appendix

Changes in Narrative Voice in *La casa de los espíritus*

The narrative structure of this novel is complex, incorporating three distinct types of changes within the narration:

1. **Changes of narrative voice:** there are two voices which alternate to tell the story. Both use first and third person. The reader is given clues throughout the narration that the two have a connection, but their relationship is not explicitly revealed until the end of the novel.
2. **Changes of time:** there are “jumps” in time, mostly jumps of months or years.
3. **Changes in setting:** the story takes place in the city and at the country home, *Las Tres Marias*.

The changes in narrative voice take place without warning and at irregular intervals in the narrative. In the last chapter, it is revealed that the two narrators are Esteban Trueba and Alba. Furthermore, all portions of the story told in Esteban’s voice are mediated by Alba who apparently has transcribed the portion of his narration, though it is never clearly stated if she has *transcribed* or *interpreted* her grandfather’s version. The following page-by-page guide to changes in narrative voice serves as a quick index, rather than an exhaustive study of the narrative voice. It should be noted that all page citations refer to the original Spanish text as noted in the bibliography.

Page by Page Guide to Changes in Narrative Voice

This table denotes the exact pages narrated by each character.

At times, both characters are listed as narrating the same page,

indicating that there is a change somewhere on that page.

Sometimes these changes take place at the beginning of

chapters, i.e., Esteban's voice takes over at the start of

Chapters 6 and 10. Other changes take place within the

chapters themselves and are indicated by a double-spaced line.

Other than this physical indication on the page, the reader relies

on verb tenses and point of view (first person or third person)

to ascertain who is telling the story.

As the table indicates, Alba, who speaks mostly in third

person, both begins and ends the narration. Esteban, speaking

in first person, takes over eleven times throughout the novel.

Clearly, Alba's voice dominates, as she narrates 349 pages

while Esteban's voice prevails for only 50 pages.

This guide is intended only to show from whose point

of view the story is being told at any given time. It is recognized

that Alba is presented as the fictitious author and therefore

mediates the entire narrative, even when the story is being told

from Esteban's point of view.

Alba	Esteban
9-26	
	27-31
31-38	
	38-42
43-56	
	56-59
59-112	
	112-117
117-170	
	170-175
175-194	
	194-200
200-277	
	277-280
280-288	
	288-290
290-297	
	297-302
302-354	
	354-358
358-392	
	392-401
401-409	