

# Of Love and Shadows: Romance Novel or Political Protest?

Mary Rice<sup>1</sup>

1. Spanish Department, Concordia College, Moorhead, Minnesota, U.S.A,  
E-mail:mrice@cord.edu

---

## Abstract

In her second novel, *Of Love and Shadows*, Isabel Allende uses many elements of popular fiction to expand her audience with the rhetorical purpose of raising their awareness of the atrocities committed by the dictatorship. The appropriation of characteristics typical of the romance genre appeals to the female reader, causing her to identify with Irene, whose consciousness is raised by her relationship with Francisco and their shared experiences. At the same time, the multiple narrative perspectives create a space for the male reader, drawing him into an emotion as well as intellectual engagement for the cause of justice. The purpose of this paper is to examine the specific elements of romance fiction contained in *Of Love and Shadows* in order to determine how this novel breaks from or transforms the genre and how the elements of romance serve to strengthen the author's testimonial about her homeland.

**Key words:** dictatorship, romance, feminism, social class

---

## Resumen

En su segunda novela, *De amor y de sombra*, Isabel Allende utiliza muchos elementos de ficción popular para masificar su público lector con el propósito retórico de elevar su conciencia respecto de las atrocidades cometidas por la dictadura. La apropiándose de las características típicas del género romántico logra atraer a las lectoras, provocando que se identifiquen con Irene, cuya conciencia se eleva debido a su relación con Francisco y por las experiencias que comparten. Al mismo tiempo, las múltiples perspectivas narrativas crean un espacio para el lector varón, arrastrándolo hacia la emoción y el compromiso intelectual por la justicia.

El propósito de este trabajo es examinar los elementos específicos de la ficción romántica contenidos en *De amor y de sombra* para determinar de qué manera esta novela cambia o transforma el género y cómo los elementos del romance sirven para fortalecer el homenaje de la autora hacia su tierra natal.

**Palabras claves:** dictadura, romance, feminismo, clase social

### ***Of Love and Shadows: Romance Novel or Political Protest?***

Isabel Allende is not a romance writer. Her first novel, *The House of the Spirits*, was one of the most successful novels of the 1980's, causing the greatest sensation in Latin American literature since García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and making her the most widely-read female writer from Latin America (Moody 39). This critically acclaimed novel earned her an almost immediate position in the canon of Latin American Literature, a status achieved by no other woman. *The House of Spirits* is the saga of the Trueba family dynasty against the backdrop of the rise and fall of Salvador Allende's government, although the country or its historical figures are never mentioned by name. Allende successfully weaves together the elements of magic, realism and the details of Chilean history to create a novel that entertains at the same time as it explains the complex circumstances leading to the military coup.

Surprisingly, the paperback translation of Allende's second novel, *Of Love and Shadows*, was marketed alongside popular romance novels in supermarkets and department stores. The purpose of this paper is to examine the elements of romance fiction contained in *Of Love and Shadows*. How does this novel break from or transform the genre? How do the elements of romance serve to strengthen the author's testimonial about her homeland?

Both *The House of the Spirits* and Allende's second novel *Of Love and Shadows* belong to a type of Latin American literature known as the testimonial novel, a literature with the purpose of bearing witness to a specific time and place in Latin American history. In an interview about her first novel Allende said, "All those of us who write and are fortunate enough to be published ought to assume the responsibility for serving the cause of freedom and justice. We have a mission to accomplish in the front lines" (Meyer 151).

In her second novel, Allende's style is less influenced by magic realism and more by the popular genres of romance and detective fiction. As Juan Manuel Marcos notes, one of

the characteristics of the new generation of Latin American novelists to which Allende belongs is the repopularization of the text "in order to recover that vast mass of potential readers. . . ." (270). According to Walter Benjamin, "[T]he massive reproductibility of cultural products in modern society... can also give to the truly revolutionary artist adequate means to reach the widest sectors, to awaken their intelligence and their will, and to influence through them in favor of the perfecting of social relations. (qtd. in Marcos 271)

Because Allende sees her writing as fulfilling a "mission" or to bear witness to the events of her homeland, she is naturally interested in reaching a wider audience. Since both *The House of the Spirits* and *Of Love and Shadows* focus on the lives of women as they are affected by the events of late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Chilean history, it is safe to assume that the major portion of Allende's readers are women. Thus it is not surprising that she would appropriate elements of the romance novel in order to more effectively appeal to that audience.

Romances continue to be one of the most widely-selling types of literature. According to Tania Modleski, "Clearly, the incredible popularity of Harlequin novels indicates a degree of responsiveness in women that requires further analysis" (35). Romances are often criticized as escapist literature, with Harlequin commercials giving us the idea that their novels will carry the housewife away from her humdrum existence. But as Janice Radway learned in her interviews with a group of romance readers, they don't view their own reading as escapist, but rather as educational. Reading romances is a fulfilling and entertaining way for some women to meet their own intellectual needs, to learn about faraway places and distant times without having to leave their own homes.

Like Allende's first novel, *Of Love and Shadows* also takes place in an unnamed country with striking parallels to Chile under Pinochet's dictatorship. Irene Beltrán and Francisco Leal are journalists who work for a women's magazine. Sent to the town of Los Riscos to investigate the story of Evangelina Ranquileo, an adolescent girl reported to

work minor miracles, they witness a bizarre series of events. As a crowd of pilgrims gathers, Evangelina falls into her usual noon-hour trance/seizure. When the army arrives in an attempt to exert control over the situation, the girl, with supernatural strength, picks up the commanding officer, Lt. Ramírez, twirls him above her head and hurls him from the house. The soldiers leave in humiliation, returning later that night to arrest Evangelina. The next day, she and her brother, one of the soldiers under Lt. Ramírez's command, have both disappeared. Their mother asks Irene and Francisco to help find them. Their investigation leads them to an abandoned mine where they discover a secret mass grave. They send proof of this finding to the Cardinal, who uses the authority of the Church to protect their identity and open the graves. When the public outcry dies down and the government does nothing to bring the killers to justice, Irene continues to gather evidence and Francisco uses his connections in the resistance movement to smuggle tapes and photographs to the international press. Eventually the dictatorship is forced to try and convict Lt. Ramírez and his officers, who are subsequently freed by a decree of amnesty. Meanwhile, Irene is gunned down on the street, nearly dies, and as soon as she is able to leave the hospital, she and Francisco assume new identities and flee the country.

At the outset of the novel, Irene and Francisco are best friends, although Francisco has been in love with her since the moment he laid eyes on her. "He remembered the day he had met her, how he had been dazzled by her smile. He had loved her from that moment." (Allende 194). Irene is engaged to her childhood sweetheart, Captain Gustavo Morante, whom she sees only on rare occasions since he is often stationed far away. Their brief encounters are enjoyable sexual interludes, but Irene keeps refusing to set a wedding date.

Irene ... seldom thought about love; she never questioned her long relationship, but accepted it as a natural condition inscribed in her fate from the time she was a little girl. She had heard so often that Gustavo Morante was her ideal mate that she had come to

believe it, without ever examining her feelings. . . . When she pondered her future, she tended to become melancholy, and that was her reason for wanting to live her unfettered life as long as she could (Allende 65).

As she investigates Evangelina's disappearance, Irene, who has led a very sheltered upper-class existence, starts to see the reality of the military dictatorship and its effects on people's lives. She also begins to wonder if her fiancé could be responsible for any of the torturing and killing.

Irene thought about Gustavo in the light of new truths. She suspected that, like any officer, he was involved in the exercise of power, a secret life he had never shared with her. Two different beings existed in the familiar, athletic body. For the first time, she was afraid of him and wished he would never return (Allende 121).

As her distrust of Gustavo grows, her dependence on and attraction to Francisco increase. The intense fear and emotions evoked by the discovery of the bodies in the mine cause Francisco and Irene to seek comfort in each other's arms.

Little by little the weight pressing upon Francisco's spirit began to lighten. He became aware of the beauty of the sky, the gentleness of the earth, the fresh smell of the fields, the feel of Irene against his body. . . . [T]he insanity of the events that had led them to this cavern was but an excuse to bring him finally to this precious instant when he had her for himself, close beside him, all her guards lowered, vulnerable. He felt a surge of compelling and overpowering desire. . . . Irene would be his because it had been written from the beginning of time (Allende 194).

From that night on they are bound to each other with a love like neither has ever known before.

Irene had not loved like this; she had not known surrender without barriers, fear, or reserve; she did not remember having felt such pleasure, such profound communication, such mutual exchange (Allende 196).

When Irene is shot, Francisco nurses her to health and arranges to take her safely into exile. At the end of the novel, as they cross

the mountains, "They felt dwarfed, alone, vulnerable, two desolate sailors adrift on a sea of mountain peaks and clouds amid a lunar silence, but they also felt that their love had taken on a new and awe-inspiring dimension, and that it would be the source of their strength in exile" (Allende 289-90).

Although there are many variations of the romance genre, Harlequins are one of the best known for following a set formula, and therefore provide a point of departure for examining the elements that create a romance novel. Quoting from *The Writer's 1978 Yearbook*, Modleski defines the characteristics of a Harlequin romance:

Harlequins are well-plotted, strong romances with a happy ending. They are told from the heroine's point of view and in the third person. There may be elements of mystery or adventure but these must be subordinate to the romance. The books are contemporary and settings can be anywhere in the world as long as they are authentic (36).

The heroine, often of lower social status than the hero, holds out against attacks on her virtue until he marries her.

The first element of the Harlequin romance is the happy ending. Although Irene and Francisco have found true love, it would be difficult to assert that this is a happy ending. They are forced by the political oppression of their government to leave friends, family and homeland to live in exile. The justice they sought for the victims of the Los Riscos mine is never realized and the dictatorship remains unaffected by their sacrifices. If, as I am claiming, this novel has the rhetorical purpose of bearing witness to and protesting the atrocities sanctioned by the Pinochet regime, it seems to be accomplished by the simultaneous fulfillment and transgression, perhaps what one might call the *transformation*, of generic constraints. The reader is satisfied that the romantic requirement is fulfilled, and through identification is moved by the tragic circumstances left unresolved to protest against a government that fosters and condones the events described in the novel. It seems to me that a very interesting rhetorical strategy can be found in the point of view expressed by the narrative voice in

*Of Love and Shadows*. While Allende employs a third person narrator as do Harlequin romances, the point of view shifts throughout the novel. The passages from the heroine's perspective most often have to do with the unraveling of the mystery surrounding Evangelina's disappearance and with Irene's loss of political innocence. Irene is the main character, the one with whom the majority of readers will identify, particularly female readers who are more likely to identify this novel as a romance. Irene begins the novel in blissful ignorance of any problems with the government. "[Francisco] often expressed his opinion about the catastrophic state of the nation since the armed forces had come out of their barracks to usurp power. Irene justified the coup, using arguments she had heard from her fiancé" (Allende 102). But gradually, as she comes to know the families of the "disappeared" in Los Riscos, as she visits the morgue in search of Evangelina's body, as she hears Sergeant Faustino Rivera tell of the torture and killing of political prisoners, as she wonders about her own father's disappearance, as Francisco's brother commits suicide because of unemployment, as Lt. Ramírez and his men receive amnesty for their crimes, and as she herself becomes a victim of the regime, her consciousness is raised to the injustices occurring in her country.

Irene had lived surrounded by the gales of hatred, but remained untouched by them behind the high wall that had protected her since childhood. Now, however, her suspicions had been aroused, and making the decision to enter the Morgue was a step that was to affect her entire life. She had never seen a dead body until the day she saw enough to fill her worst nightmares...

Even though their journey through the Morgue had lasted only half an hour, when she left Irene Beltrán was no longer the same; something had shattered her soul. (Allende 118)

As the reader lives these experiences with Irene, she shares her loss of innocence and her interest in bringing about justice. As noted by Doris Meyer, "By making Irene Beltrán's 'fall from innocence' the center of her novel, Isabel Allende announces that

women must turn silent complicity into outspoken activism" (157)

Most of the passages dealing with the romantic relationship between Francisco and Irene are from his point of view. The fact that the romantic relationship is seen primarily from Francisco's perspective is significant in providing a space for the male reader. While women are perhaps guilty of escaping into romantic fantasies, men might be guilty of just the opposite, of recognizing and taking an interest in politics, but of seeing it as separate from the intimacies of their daily lives. By being invited to identify with the romantic relationship through Francisco's masculine perspective, the male reader is asked to become *emotionally* engaged in the political events of the novel, true events which are only slightly fictionalized by Allende.

The narrative voice often represents the perspective of secondary and even peripheral characters: Irene's mother, Francisco's parents, Evangelina's mother, Sgt. Faustino Rivera, the Cardinal, Gustavo Morante, a gay hairdresser, even the dictator himself. The points of view of secondary and minor characters are included to give a more complete picture of society. "[T]he constantly switching point of view [serves] as a means of demonstrating how a military coup could take place and be accepted in a country with a long history of democracy" (Gernes 461). This adds to the rhetorical effectiveness of the novel as a whole by presenting the anti-Pinochet point of view in contrast with the reasoning of his supporters. The pro-military point of view is presented through the eyes of several characters, some of whom seem frivolous and self-centered, such as Irene's mother, and others, like Gustavo, who are genuinely committed to the need for the military to maintain order while at the same time opposing the excesses of absolute authority. Given the whole spectrum of political opinion as represented by the multiple points of view, the reader can come to the more or less informed conclusion, as does Irene, that anyone who values freedom and justice must oppose the Pinochet government. Of course, as stated above, the reader is highly influenced through her identification with Irene, but is

still made to feel that all points of view have been presented and considered.

In the romance formula, the heroine is often of lower social status than the hero. In this case, the opposite is true. Francisco is the son of working-class Spanish exiles who, ironically, came to Latin America to escape the tyranny of Franco's dictatorship. His father is a professor, now unemployed. "Because of his political ideas, Professor Leal was placed on the list of undesirables, and forced to retire" (Allende 25). Irene's father was from a wealthy, upper-class family, but squandered his fortune and disappeared. Irene's mother, a staunch supporter of the regime, considers Francisco beneath her daughter in social status. "Francisco recognized at first glance Beatriz's class prejudices and ideologies" (Allende 39). The inversion of the social classes of the hero and heroine is necessary in order to explain Irene's ignorance of the effects of the regime and her subsequent conversion to a more enlightened point of view. Francisco is aware of the injustices and atrocities of the dictatorship not only because they have directly affected his father and brothers in their work, but because his parents, as victims of a historically similar change of government in Spain, have raised him to recognize the dangers of absolute authority. Irene, as a member of the privileged class, was virtually unaffected by the coup and her life, if anything, was improved by it. It is only through her investigation of Evangelina's disappearance and her association with Francisco that her eyes are opened to the truth.

Gothic romances such as those of Victoria Holt, Phyllis Whitney and Mary Stewart usually present the heroine with the dilemma of choosing between two men, one of whom often turns out to be the villain. As Modleski observes, "[T]he woman has either gotten involved with the wrong man, and the right man comes along and saves her from the villainy of the first man; or else the lover/husband changes" --far from being the villain the heroine mistook him for, he is revealed to be the true hero (74).

In *Of Love and Shadows*, Irene chooses Francisco over Gustavo, a choice in large part motivated by her investigation of

Evangelina's disappearance. As she is drawn further into the realities of military terrorism she loses her innocence and begins to question her basic assumptions both about politics and about her future with Gustavo. Irene begins to wonder if her fiancé, a captain in the army, could be guilty of similar atrocities. Although in the end Gustavo turns out to be a good guy and is executed for trying to lead a rebellion against the regime, during most of the novel he is perceived as a villain because of his association with the military. Francisco, on the other hand, as a member of the resistance movement, symbolizes the struggle for good and justice. Irene's choice of Francisco over Gustavo for her romantic partner occurs at the same time as, and is then symbolic of, her loss of innocence regarding the reality of the dictatorship and her engagement in the ideological struggle of her people. As she becomes aware of the military abuses of power, she starts to associate Gustavo with men like Lt. Ramírez.. At the same time she learns of Francisco's efforts to help the victims of the military and is drawn to him for all the noble and altruistic qualities she does not see in Gustavo.

The rhetorical effectiveness of the novel in persuading the reader to its ideological perspective is in large part due to its ability to create a sense of identification between its reader and the heroine. By including many of the formulaic elements of the romance genre (happy ending to the romance, mystery, the choice between two lovers, the unequal social status of hero/heroine), the author has invited the female reader to identify emotionally with the heroine. Because Irene's romantic dilemma (Francisco or Gustavo) is so closely linked to an ideological awakening and the decision to support or oppose the government, the reader is unconsciously drawn into a similar experience. As Irene's innocence is destroyed by the horror of her discoveries, so too the reader is exposed to the harsh realities of politically motivated torture, poverty, unemployment, suicide, exile and all the other atrocities of the military dictatorship. The overwhelming evidence of injustice and corruption presents a very persuasive argument against the government

of the novel, which, although never named, is clearly recognizable as that of Pinochet.

Irene is not a passive heroine simply caught up in events. She actively pursues the truth of Evangelina's disappearance even after Francisco warns her that she may be risking her safety. In this she follows a strong tendency of the gothic novel noted by Modleski, "the desperate need of the heroine to find out who her 'enemy' is. . ." (74). The enemy for Irene is not, however, an individual fictional character, but rather the entire government of her country. Because of the reader's identification with Irene, an oppositional relationship is established with the Pinochet government. Irene's active role in opposing the government and exposing its corruption provides a model for the engagement of the reader.

Isabel Allende clearly has a political agenda in writing this novel. The military coup that assassinated her uncle and plunged her homeland into seventeen years of an oppressive and corrupt military dictatorship compels her to keep her history alive in her fiction. "Thanks to my work as a journalist I knew exactly what was happening in my country; I lived it firsthand, and those dead, tortured, widowed and orphaned left indelible imprints on my memory" (qtd. in Meyer 152). Although fictionalized, the story of the mass grave in an abandoned mine is based on a similar discovery at Lonquén, fifty kilometers from Santiago (Meyer 153). By appropriating the elements of a popular genre, that of the romance, Allende has widened her base of readers, thus reaching a larger audience with the plight of her homeland. In concluding his study of this novel, Ambrose Gordon observes, "Unlike certain novels of the Boom . . . which enlarge or change our conception of what a novel might be, Isabel Allende has left the novel genre about where she found it. But I am not a novelist and I reflect that novels may also be regarded as weapons. Isabel Allende appears to me to have handled hers with skill to strike a blow for freedom and love against the tyranny that still grips her beautiful country. W. H. Auden once wrote that poems make nothing happen; but novels, less pure, perhaps may" (541-42).

## Works Cited

- Allende, Isabel. *Of Love and Shadows*. Trans. Margaret Sayers Peden. New York: Bantam Books, 1988.
- Gernes, Sonia "Lovers & 'Desaparecidos'." *Commonweal* 114 (1987): 460-62.
- Gordon, Ambrose. "Isabel Allende on Love and Shadow." *Contemporary Literature* 28.4: 530-42.
- Marcos, Juan Manuel. "El género popular como meta-estructura textual del post-boom latinoamericano." *Monographic Review/Revista Monográfica* 3.1-2 (1987): 268-78.
- Meyer, Doris. "Exile and the Female Condition in Isabel Allende's *De amor y de sombra*." *The International Fiction Review* 15.2 (1988): 151-57.
- Modleski, Tania. *Loving with a Vengeance*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1982.
- Moody, Michael. "Isabel Allende and the Testimonial Novel." *Confluencia* 2.1 (1986): 39-43.
- Radway, Janice. *Reading the Romance*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1984.