

DAUGHTER OF FORTUNE: ISABEL ALLENDE'S
POPULARITY FROM A READERSHIP PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this thesis is to explore and critically interrogate Isabel Allende's popularity cross-culturally in Britain and Spain. It analyses readers' responses to Allende's works as well as the discourses surrounding her public representation, an approach that is 'readerly' but must also take account of production and text. This approach is intended to further the understanding of Allende's work which so far has always been analysed from a textual perspective. However, the relationship between Allende's popularity, her texts, public representation and readers has not been yet analysed in detail.

This thesis is innovative in other ways too. Methodologically, it approaches readers through the under studied cultural form of the reading group. It also incorporates a comparative dimension by looking at the reception of Allende in two different cultural contexts: the British and Spanish respectively. Finding out about Allende's popularity has involved asking readers about their reading experiences as well as analysing the production of discourses around her public representation. Paul Ricoeur's (1984, 1988) perspective on authorial intentions and readers' responses to texts helps in understanding the intricacies surrounding what is involved in reading any text. It draws attention to Allende's and her publishers' authorial strategies, her 'strategies of persuasion' and the specificity of the lives and contexts of British and Spanish reading publics. Equally, this 'readerly' approach draws on feminist audience research and primarily on the work of Ien Ang and Janice Radway. Their work with viewers

and readers respectively is particularly useful in establishing and developing methodological parameters for the study of reading groups.

As a whole, this thesis contributes to the understanding of Allende's cross-cultural popularity by situating readers at the centre.

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Introduction

Isabel Allende's love affair with the written word has had a long history that began with her work as broadcaster, journalist in women's magazines, playwright and children's author (Moody, 1987:52). In several of her interviews (Invernizzi and Pope, 1989:123; Rodden, 1991:114; Correias, 1998:83) Allende has recalled how Chilean Nobel Prize winner Pablo Neruda predicted her future accomplishments as a novelist since her vivid imagination was suited for fiction writing rather than journalism. Neruda's prediction materialised as soon as *The House of the Spirits* was published in Spain in 1982, attaining best selling figures there as well as overseas. From that moment on, there has been no turning back for Allende, whose world-wide success has situated her as one of the few women Latin American writers of her generation attaining international recognition.

Despite all this resounding success, another ten years had to pass before my own personal love affair with Allende began. At the time, I was a Spanish undergraduate at the National University of Ireland, Galway (NUIG) and during this period, I started cultivating an interest in Latin American literature. The study programmes offered by this Irish institution prompted this interest and I became familiar with the works of Gabriel García Márquez, Mario Vargas Llosa, Manuel Puig, Miguel Ángel Asturias and Jorge Luis Borges but in particular it was Allende's novels which especially touched me. *The House of the Spirits* moved me in a way that no other Latin American novels had managed to do so far and my own family history had played a significant role in generating such

response. Among all the countries in Latin America, Chile held a privileged position for me. While all members of my immediate family are Spanish and live in Spain, there are currently descendants of my grandmother's cousins still living in Chile who had experienced first hand the political turmoil of 1973 and its aftermath. *The House of the Spirits* felt really close to me since it tapped into many family memories and stories I had heard in my childhood. In a short period, I had not just read all of Allende's titles but also had completed an MA dissertation whose themes and inspiration had originated in *The House of the Spirits*.

This academic work, though, changed my relationship with Allende since I began to engage with her work in a more analytical way and not just regard it as a pleasurable read. Nonetheless, this combination of the academic and the personal helped me frame my future relationship with the author and her work. When I initially thought about this thesis proposal, I was reluctant to abandon the more personal and intimate side of my relationship with Allende in my experience as a passionate reader of her work. However, I had to find the ways in which the personal drive behind this research could lead to legitimate and meaningful academic work.

Before I embarked on this project, I familiarised myself with the areas other fellow academics and literary critics had explored in Allende's work. I knew that the previous extensive work on Allende's fiction had been primarily analysed within the formal frameworks of Allende's novels but what had received little attention was the production and consumption of Allende's public figure and writings in specific cultural contexts. More importantly, there had been no significant attempts to offer insights into the complex issue surrounding

the author's popularity. Just the work carried by Meg H. Brown (1994) had examined Allende's alongside Angeles Mastretta's success by looking into their reception in West Germany. However, unlike this project, Brown's study did not employ a readerly approach to reach its findings. This research, therefore, moves beyond Brown's by situating readers' responses to Allende's novels and public discourses at the center. In this way, it aims to present a richer and deeper understanding into the complexities surrounding Allende's popularity, a term which itself requires careful critical examination (See chapter one).

Most critical work on Allende has therefore focussed on textual elements such as female representation, Allende's feminism and the displacement of patriarchal discourse in her narratives (Rojas, 1985; Mora, 1987; Gómez Parham, 1988; Handelsman, 1988; Hart, 1989; Meyer 1990; Gould Levine 1990, García Johnson, 1994). Mario Rojas and Michael Handelsman's studies examine from a feminist perspective the transformation the different generations of Del Valle women undergo in *The House of the Spirits*. In particular, Rojas by employing feminist criticism from Ellen Morgan, Sheila Rowbothan and Adrienne Rich, concludes that Allende's text could be considered as an example of the 'neo-feminist' novel since through Nívea, Clara, Blanca and Alba, Allende 'va registrando el curso de viejas y nuevas formas de participación de la mujer en su lucha por los derechos de su propio sexo y por los de las clases sociales desposeídas' (1985:921) ('[she] registers the direction old and new forms of women's participation in their fight for the rights of their own sex and for those of the marginal social classes'). Unlike Rojas and Handelsman, Gabriela Mora's article rather interrogates Allende's feminism in *The House of the Spirits* and *Of Love and Shadows*. Mora argues that in *The House of the Spirits* Alba's

passivity and acceptance at the end of the novel calls into question 'la raíz ética del feminismo [que] no se conforma con que la acción se quede en el escribir y el esperar' (1987:164) ('the ethical roots of feminism which cannot be satisfied with the idea that the action rests in the writing and waiting'). Linda Gould Levine's feminist reading of *The House of the Spirits* argues for a reconciliation of the women and men characters in the novel. To achieve this, Gould Levine examines how the concept of 'androgyny' may lead to a reading of the novel where women and patriarchy are being brought closer together. Mary Gómez Parham offers an insightful account of the generational bonding among the Del Valle women in *The House of the Spirits*. She examines in detail the mother-daughter relationships established among Clara, Blanca and Alba to conclude that *The House of the Spirits* should undoubtedly be placed among those novels that contribute to the 'literature of matrilineage'. Ronie-Richelle García Johnson's contribution to Allende's studies resides in her original approach to the treatment of women in *The House of the Spirits*. Thus, her analysis shows that in their struggle to dominate space, the women in *The House* 'overcome the tyranny of patriarchy' (1994:185). Equally innovative is Doris Meyer reading of *The House of the Spirits*. Basing her analysis on Hélène Cixous and M. M. Bakhtin's theories, Meyer approaches Allende's text as a 'double-voiced discourse' (1990:361) that situates Alba as the 'dominant narrative voice' as well as incorporating the andocentric voice of Esteban Trueba, which according to Meyer, 'is essential to the novel's theme of self-renewal and rebirth' (*ibid*). Finally, Patricia Hart's book *Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende* becomes an indispensable and excellent reference to the various readings that the character of Clara and her clairvoyance may suggest. Besides, Hart's extensive

study offers an insightful analysis of Allende's use of magical realism which she refers to with as 'magical feminism'.

Some of the above have been undoubtedly useful and appropriated when examining some of the readers' responses in this research. For example, Gould Levine's concept of 'androgyny' was helpful trying to make sense of readers' reconciling feelings towards the character of Esteban Trueba. Also the studies from Rojas, Handelsman, Mora, Gómez Parham or Hart assisted me when analysing readers' difficulties in coming to terms with Allende's representation of certain characters such as the 'unconventional' Clara del Valle. Nonetheless, what these feminist readings failed to assess was whether Allende's feminism – mostly embodied in the representation of her women characters – could be considered an element which may contribute to her popularity. This involves asking what Allende's women characters signify for women readers. Absences like this one are addressed by the readerly approach of this thesis.

Besides - and to a lesser extent – some other critical work has analysed the use and appropriation of history in Allende's novels (Cortínez, 1991; Diamond Nigh, 1995; Boyle, 1995). Verónica Cortínez's study intends by comparing the work of Bernal Díaz's *La historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España* and Allende's *The House of the Spirits* to establish a connexion between both novels. In particular, Cortínez is interested in exploring how through memory the historical events narrated in both texts are recovered by their respective first person narrators, Bernal and Alba. Cortínez concludes that the use of prolepsis in *The House of the Spirits* allows Alba to overcome the limitations experienced by Bernal or any first person narrator when facing the difficult task of 'recuperar todas las memorias y las memorias de todos'

(1991:325) ('to recover all memories and the memories from everybody'). Lynne Diamond-Nigh's article examines through *Eva Luna* the connections between writing and history particularly in the shape of political activism. To achieve this, her argument is subdivided within five thematic clusters which interrogate Allende's claims as regards the 'revolutionary possibilities of literature [or writing] to create and remake life' (1995: 29). Catherine Boyle's innovative analysis from a Cultural Studies perspective of *The House of the Spirits* explores the possible reading frameworks that the novel might offer to the reader. Her analysis concludes that 'although the background is the Chilean experience, we are denied the possibility of "seeing" that experience as a historical process' (1995:111) and therefore the only framework within which to read the novel becomes that of the text itself, 'isolated from its context' (*ibid*). Among the studies above, Boyle's in particular, generated a series of stimulating arguments some of which were of particular interest for this research given some of the connections she established between the historical and Allende's "real" readership. This approach led to a rich dialogue between her findings and my own with Allende's "real" readers. Nonetheless, all of the above studies on the historical fell short in taking on board the significance that the historical element may carry for Allende's popularity. In this respect, this research seeks to overcome such shortcoming by re-evaluating the importance of the use of historical elements from a readers' perspective.

Finally, a third cluster of critical work on Allende focuses on how within an intertextual framework the magical realist discourse model developed by Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* had heavily influenced *The House of the Spirits* (Antoni, 1988; Urbina 1990; Moore,

1994; Keck, 1996). Robert Antoni's essay carefully considers what parallels can be established between Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. For such purpose, Antoni exposes correlations of language, technique, characters and events between both family sagas but concludes that despite any parallels found between both novels, and the fact that *The House of the Spirits* 'more consciously than unconsciously may begin as an attempt to rewrite *One Hundred Years of Solitude*' Allende's text ends up 'discover[ing] itself as a unique statement' (1988:25). Nicasio Urbina and Ray M. Keck philological approaches to Allende's and Márquez's texts are based on a detailed semiological analysis which enables both critics to draw together the constants and parallels between both narrative discourses. Pamela Moore's article compares both texts by employing a feminist perspective which ultimately aims at challenging 'the stability of the categories of sexual difference laid out in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and other canonical texts of magical realism' (1994:99). All of these studies have been of relevance for my own research with readers since some of the readers' comments equally established stylistic and thematic parallels between Márquez and Allende. However, this research advances the critics' arguments further by adding a new perspective to the Márquez-Allende relationship. This readership approach will show that the connections existing between both authors at a textual level reveal issues regarding Allende's position in the Latin American canon as well as her popularity.

Originality

While all of the above studies are predominantly text-based, this research moves beyond the textual approach to incorporate other important aspects forming part of the 'cultural circuit' (Johnson et al., 2004:38). These aspects include readers' experiences reading Allende, the production and consumption of Allende's discourses and the readers' own lives. What this means is that although in this research the focus moves from texts to readers, Allende's writings are not being neglected, as these constitute important starting points to understand readers' readings and their every day life issues.

This thesis innovates in other ways too. In terms of method, it approaches readers through the under studied cultural form of the reading group and incorporates a comparative dimension by looking at the reception of Allende in two different cultural contexts: the British and Spanish respectively. The ways in which Allende is read by a sample of British and Spanish reading groups will shed light in understanding her popularity, an aspect of Allende's consumption that had always fascinated me. This fascination began by discovering Allende in the same way ordinary readers do. What was unusual, though, about my readings was the complex transnational nature of the process. Allende was a Latin American woman author, published and widely read in Spain. She was also included as a compulsory read in a Latin American Studies MA reading list at the National University of Ireland. Later on, I discovered that Allende's inclusion in undergraduate reading lists was common in English speaking universities but rare or non-existent in Spanish ones. I wondered, therefore, how Allende had achieved such recognition and become so "popular" in these two

different cultural contexts. How could the reader's perspective of this thesis throw light on such success? Could my own pleasurable experience reading Allende similarly illuminate why other readers felt attracted towards her work? Were there any differences or similarities that could explain Allende's success cross culturally among readers? British and Spanish readers' responses to Allende's texts have helped in answering these questions, enabling me to understand her cross-cultural popularity.

The particular choice of national research contexts, based on my own experience, also made sense for this particular enquiry. Spain was the first European country to publish Allende's novels and, as a native speaker having ready access to Spanish sources and a degree of critical insight into the culture, it made sense to set and develop this part of the fieldwork with Spanish readers. Similarly, having lived in Britain for the past ten years has equipped me with the language as well as the cultural knowledge necessary to explore the particularities of British reception.

As already mentioned, this thesis not only seeks to throw light on what readers find engaging in Allende's work. The appeal and value of this readerly focus is that it does not necessarily ignore but successfully incorporates other aspects – Allende's novels and public discourses - that equally contribute to the understanding of popularity in Allende.

Chapter Rationale

This thesis has been structured into nine chapters and a conclusion that gradually reveal the different features British and Spanish readers identified and that are significant for understanding what constitutes Allende's popularity.

Chapter one situates this research from a theoretical and methodological perspective. It critically examines the different approaches given to the term "popular". It deals with issues surrounding the production and consumption of texts and how Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics becomes a useful tool to throw light on Allende's popularity. This chapter also situates this research within the wider tradition of feminist audience research and shows how this tradition supported and informed the various methodological choices that occurred throughout the different stages of this project as shall be seen in chapter two.

Chapter two addresses how I found Allende's readers in Britain and Spain and how researching readers' responses to Allende's texts was originally carried out in the form of reading groups. It discusses at length the different methodological implications that reading groups brought to the research context acknowledging their suitability not only in terms of accessing Allende readers but also as a means of experiencing first hand the processes they employed in making sense of her readings. This privileged access to readers' interpretations and emotional responses is the basis of my arguments about Allende's popularity in later chapters. This chapter then analyses British and Spanish groups' specificity emphasizing the differences and continuities observed between the two researched contexts when in the field. The questionnaires supplied to each reading group also provided valuable insights for understanding the rather

different reading publics which were interpreting Allende's texts. Finally, this chapter examines the methods I employed to record readers' discussions as well as the tools used to select, edit and interpret readers' readings of Allende.

Chapter three explores Allende's popularity as a bestselling author in both Britain and Spain regardless of the ways in which readers read her works. This chapter therefore examines the features that characterise the British and Spanish press public discourses about Allende in an attempt to evaluate how 'extra-literary' factors – factors outside Allende's novels – contribute to her bestselling status. This chapter also considers how certain socio-historical contexts facilitated Allende's initial reception and consumption in Spain and finally interrogates the possible causes of Allende's ambiguous relationship with the canon and academy in particular in the Spanish context.

Chapters four, five and six share Allende's treatment of character as an underlying common theme. This feature has not been chosen randomly, but responds to the prominence this aspect equally received across British and Spanish readers. Chapter four thus analyses the different aspects British and Spanish readers identified as generally appealing in Allende's characterization without singling out any particular character. It also examines the various degrees of involvement readers experienced with characters and finally considers readers' comments in relation to Allende's central female characterization as well as women readers' exploration of new subjectivities. Whereas chapter four highlights issues which are of a more general nature and relevant to the vast array of Allende's characters, chapters five and six concentrate on those specific characters which British and Spanish readers chose to discuss during their meetings.

In chapter five then, I examine readers' responses to the specific fictional characters of Esteban Trueba and Clara del Valle in *The House of the Spirits* and Eliza Sommers in *Daughter of Fortune*. These are all main characters in Allende's novels with the exception of Colonel Esteban García in *The House of the Spirits* who particularly intrigued one men only reading group.

Chapter six is entirely devoted to examining female readers' responses¹ to Allende as a "character" in her autobiographical novel *Paula*. As well as in the previous two chapters, the abundance of material produced by the three groups that read *Paula* was sufficient to dedicate an entire chapter to issues around characterisation in this work. As in chapter five, women readers keep on exploring and interrogating their own subjectivities through processes of identification/dis-identification. This time though, Isabel Allende herself becomes their reference point to identify/dis-identify mainly in her role as mother and wife. In *Paula* these processes occur more directly encouraged by the sense of intimacy the author has managed to create among her readers. This is possible given the autobiographical undertones the book presents and that readers recognise partly through other "extra-literary" accounts that confirm and sustain Allende's "realistic" images in *Paula*. This chapter also shows how *Paula* offered readers a space to speculate about the "real" Allende, so its final part discusses with specific examples (a radio interview, internet sources and book blurbs) issues that were already noted and analysed in chapter three in relation to mediations of Allende's personal image. What the overall analysis of readers' responses to characterization ultimately seeks is to assess how the

¹ Members in the two British groups and one Spanish group who discussed *Paula* were all women. It is for this reason that in this instance it is possible to generalise and refer to women readers only. Detailed gender breakdown of the groups will be found in chapter two.

different elements readers highlighted about this feature have contributed to answer the main question on Allende's popularity.

Chapter seven signifies a thematic break from the three previous chapters. In this chapter I examine what British and Spanish readers understand as the historical and 'magical' elements in Allende's novels. As with characterization, these two features were discussed across most British and Spanish reading groups and in this sense they have not been chosen indiscriminately but as a result of careful examination of readers' responses. This chapter thus argues that British and Spanish readers value the historical for appraising Allende's narratives as "truth", but more importantly for justifying the act of reading itself under an 'ideology of instruction and self-improvement' (Long, 1987:319). This chapter also reveals how the 'magical' – or the more "literary" magical realism – in *The House of the Spirits* becomes an element of contention for British and Spanish groups. British readers generally conceive the 'magical' as an obstacle for the historical processes to take place and a breach of generic expectations, whereas Spanish are more ready to accept that both worlds – the historical and 'magical' – can coexist as part of the same reality. This chapter finally explores how these two distinctive ways of making sense of the 'magical' may be influenced by the cultural specificity of both research contexts. As in previous chapters, both the historical and the 'magical' are being analysed as features readers identified and that may contribute to understanding Allende's popularity.

Chapter eight examines readers' responses in relation to the features characteristic of Allende's "literary" discourse. It highlights the significance of British and Spanish readers' attempts at situating Allende within the Latin American "literary" tradition of the *boom*. The chapter explores how the

connection readers establish between Allende and Gabriel García Márquez's magical realist discourse may boost Allende's popularity by locating her work within Literature or "high" culture although Spanish readers' responses also suggest that the use of magical realism obstructs Allende's accessibility – an element that is further discussed in chapter nine. In addition, this chapter displays a series of associations British readers established between Allende and other British authors such as Angela Carter, Charles Dickens and Louis de Bernières. These connections underline the complexities surrounding the reception of Allende's texts but ultimately serve as mechanisms for British readers to ascertain Allende's "literary" status.

Chapter nine focuses on the different "literary" crafting features British and Spanish readers identified as characteristic of Allende's writing style. This chapter thus infers from the readers' selections Allende's attractions and detractions as a writer. These in turn shed some light onto the understanding of her popularity.

The concluding chapter of this thesis presents an overall evaluation of all the dialogues British and Spanish readers established with Allende's novels and which constitute the basis of this research. Equally, this chapter discusses whether it is possible to reveal Allende's "formulae" of success within the specific cultural contexts of the British and Spanish reading groups who took part in this research.

Chapter One

Why is Isabel Allende so “Popular”? Theoretical Elaborations on the Research Question

Introduction

This chapter seeks to situate this research from a theoretical and methodological perspective. It begins by critically examining what is understood by the term “popular” and how the different aspects considered may relate and be used to understand Allende’s and her novels’ popularity. This chapter also examines how Paul Ricoeur’s hermeneutics, with a special emphasis on reading, are relevant and useful to the study of Allende’s popularity as well as how it complements the ‘cultural circuit’ approach to production and consumption of texts.

This chapter offers an overview of the most significant developments in the history of audience research and how in particular Ien Ang’s *Watching ‘Dallas’* (1985) and Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* (1984) have been a source of inspiration and contribution to the present research. Finally, it pays attention to the feminist approach(es) adopted in this research and its significance for the analysis of readers’ readings.

Exploring the Term “Popular”

Defining the “popular” in general, as well as the “popular” in Allende, is a complex task since as McCracken puts it: ‘the word popular has a long and contested history, which is reflected in the word’s changing meaning over the last three hundred years’ (1998:19-20). Despite these series of conceptual shifts in the recent history of the term, perhaps the culturally dominant meaning attached to the “popular” is one that highlights its commercial or quantitative nature. Products become “popular” because ‘masses of people listen to them, buy them, read them, consume them, and seem to enjoy them to the full’ (Hall, 1981:231). Yet this approach to the “popular” has often been used by cultural critics as a negative one, since it signifies the debasement of culture as large numbers of people have access to cultural products that are imposed from above, transforming them into passive consumers. It is not only an ‘inauthentic form of culture’ (Hollows, 2000:26) but also a ‘debased’ form of culture consumed by ‘debased numbers of people’ (Hall, 1981:232). Besides, the commercial or quantitative nature of the “popular” is riddled with contradictions. Authors such as Shakespeare, Dickens or Melville who during their time were considered “popular”, are currently valued as among the highest achievements of literary skill. If we consider contemporary authors such as Gabriel García Márquez whose bestselling status during the 1980s in the EEUU has not dampened down his canonical status and his place within the academy (Sánchez-Palencia 1997: 21).

This commercial definition of the “popular”, although pertinent to Allende since her fiction sells millions of copies and subsequently is read by millions of people around the world, is nonetheless inadequate as the only means

to describe her success. This definition understands popularity, here mass fiction, only in terms of one moment in the 'cultural circuit' (Johnson et al., 2004:38): its commercialised production. This definition, however, takes no account of the moment of the text itself, of the features that intrinsically characterise Allende's novels and that helped connect readers to her texts or to the author. Against this, I would argue for a definition which incorporates every moment in the 'cultural circuit' even when my focus is on readers. All of the aforementioned features are responsible for grasping the popularity Allende's works have achieved.

Other approaches of the "popular" need to be considered to fully understand what Allende's popularity might signify. The "popular" has also been defined as opposed to "high" and equated with "low" cultural forms. According to Anthony Easthope (1991) this distinction between "popular" as opposed to "high" originated in 17th century Britain where 'the "polite" and "proper" values of the gentry aimed to dominate the "vulgarity" of the "common people"' (1991:75). This split has been preserved and further theorised in the 20th century (Leavis, 1932; Fiedler 1975). However, what needs to be stressed is that this relation between "popular" and "low" is not a static one since 'popular forms become enhanced in cultural value while [...] others cease to have high cultural value, and are appropriated into the popular' (Hall, 1981:234). According to Hall, these constructs change 'from period to period' and are sustained by a series of 'institutional processes' which assign value to certain practices and classify them accordingly (*ibid*). Although Hall's words confirm the fragility surrounding the "high"/ "popular" divide, this distinction has equally sustained the stylistic separation between "high" (as "difficult" or aesthetically

superior) and “popular” (as the “easy” or obvious). This in turn perpetuates the split between what is considered Literature or the “literary” and “popular” genres. The result is that Literature or the “literary” is held to occupy a privileged position, outside or above ideology, whereas “popular” fiction is simply supposed to naturalise ideological discourses due to the use of formulaic structures (Radford, 1986). An important question that emerges is whether British and Spanish readers position Allende in relation to this dichotomy and whether Allende’s popularity is dependant on successfully crossing these boundaries.

A third set of meanings attached to the “popular” defines it as ‘the culture, mores, customs and folkways of the “the people” [...] what defines “their distinctive way of life”’ (Hall, 1981:234). However, this conception does not fully resolve the question of the “popular” since according to Hall it reduces itself to offering an inventory of what is “popular” or not, but fails to engage with the tensions that emerge ‘between what belongs to the central domain of elite or dominant culture and the culture of the “periphery”’ (*ibid*). In other words, a definition of the “popular” needs to look at it ‘as a site of struggle, a place where conflicts between dominant and subordinate groups are played out, and distinctions between the cultures of these groups are continually constructed and deconstructed’ (Hollows, 2000:27). This approach to the “popular” is indebted to Gramsci’s theories which clearly ‘stressed the dynamic quality of culture as a site for negotiation and contestation between social groups vying for power’ (Labanyi, 2002: 17). John Fiske (2001) similarly argues that ‘a text that is to be made into popular culture must, then, contain both the forces of domination and the opportunities to speak against them, the opportunities to oppose or evade

them from subordinated, but not totally disempowered positions' (1989:25). Moreover, and within this 'site of struggle', Hall argues that there is a tendency to equate 'popular culture' to 'working class culture'. Further, and following a more encompassing approach incorporating gender, "popular" can also be associated to women's cultures themselves divided by class. However, as Hall argues, any of these associations form a complex set of relationships where there is not a clear-cut 'one-to-one relationship between a class – [or/and gender] - and a particular form or practice' (Hall, 1981: 238). According to Hall certain class and gender categories and the "popular" 'are deeply related but are not absolutely interchangeable' (*ibid*).

Since these approaches to the "popular" are about readers' everyday lives, my question is whether certain features of Allende's novels such as characters and themes become salient to particular groups of readers such as the women participating in the reading groups. Are certain women characters offering women readers the possibility of adopting new subject positions? Could the adoption of new subject positions be empowering for these women readers and their everyday lives? Could the theme(s) and emotions which are for example mobilised in *Paula* be meaningful for the women readers' everyday lives? Or simply by making use of historical references is Allende able to empower women with little formal education such as some of the women in the Spanish reading groups? Are any of these features and the importance they have among specific groups of readers and their everyday lives what makes Allende so "popular"?

Given the prominence and significance that women's readers' everyday lives attains in this research, I realise that a feminist approach would be a

productive means of understanding readers' responses to Allende and her writings. Some of the basic features that I consider relevant within this feminist approach(es) is to examine the ways the women readers in the groups related to Allende and her writings. Not only this, but also relevant is to interrogate how Allende deals with gender relations in her writings and more importantly, how readers – including men – make sense of them. This takes me to consider whether Allende is a feminist writer or not, and if she is, in which sense.

As for my stance as a feminist scholar, I identify with those post modern perspectives in which the feminist scholar finds herself 'wandering on both sides of the boundary that separates fan from critic' (Brown, 1994: 15). This position has been labelled as 'fragmented' (Brunsdon, 1993) or 'nomadic' (Brown, 1994). As Brown further suggest in her study of women talking about soap opera, the critic's position 'crosses boundaries between the separation of herself from other women and the alliance of herself with other women' (1994:15-16). In the context of this research this will imply my own identification with some of issues the women in the groups discussed in connection to Allende's texts as well as instances where my position as a feminist academic makes me take an analytical stance. This fragmentation is the result of actual reading positions where both readers and researchers' subjectivities are riddled with contradictions.

Moreover, this gendered approach to readers and their involvement with Allende's texts has to be understood as a changed position and not as an essential one. As Mary Ellen Brown suggests 'the reader does not interpret from a position that is clearly defined and stable. Rather, this subject (person) changes over time and according to the multiple influences with which she or he comes in contact' (1994:14). As a result, the use of gender categories such as "woman" or

“women” is regarded as problematic in this research. Some feminist critics such as Judith Butler (1990) have argued that ‘the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms [...] and there is very little agreement after all on what it is that constitutes, or ought to constitute the category of women’ (1990:1). The term “woman” or “women” does not represent a common identity but is produced by the complex intersection of categories such as class, age, ethnicity, religion or sexuality. Therefore, ‘it is impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained’ (Butler 1990: 3). For this reason and by employing the term “woman”/ “women” throughout, I do not intend to generalise to all, either British or Spanish “women” (men) who participated in this research. Nonetheless, some of the social discourses involved and mediated by the social categories mentioned above may relate to many of the women involved in this project. For the present, however, this study will employ a non-essentialist understanding of “woman”/ “women” but will continue to use these categories since they still ‘have a currency in our culture and historical moment’ (Brown, 1994:14).

What this account of the various approaches to the “popular” suggests is that each approach foregrounds production, text or readers and their lives. This thesis adopts a readerly approach which also takes account of production and text. It is only by this means that the question of Allende’s popularity can be answered. This in turn implies that finding out about Allende’s popularity will equally involve asking readers about their reading experiences - without neglecting Allende’s novels - as well as an analysis of the production of Allende’s discourses surrounding her public representation. Nonetheless, this

readerly approach to popularity requires a closer look at the complexity of the actual reading itself. For this reason, Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics and theories of reading will be used for deepening our understanding of key issues on reading and readership.

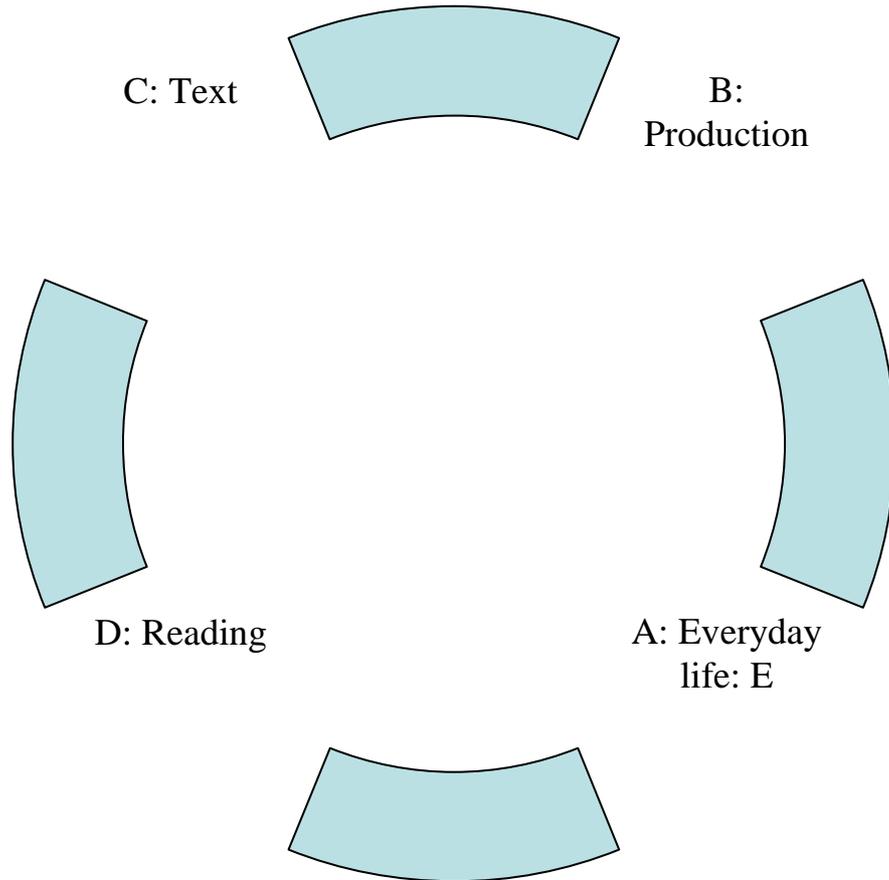
What is Involved in Reading?

Within the cultural studies tradition, any text 'must be understood within particular material conditions [...]. These are often identified in terms of a 'circuit' made up of the different stages of production, text and reader' (Gray 2003:13-14). This means that 'the text must be seen as both a product of particular social, cultural and historical conditions and as agent in circulation' (*ibid*). This approach to cultural processes has been evolving and developing from models such as Stuart Hall's (1980) televisual communication encoding/decoding to Richard Johnson's (1996) model of cultural production and consumption (Johnson et al., 2004:37).

Hall's seminal work on encoding/decoding marked an important shift towards the undermining of audiences as passive consumers. What is particularly relevant here, in Hall's model, is the interest he developed in understanding how readers/viewers actively made sense of the encoded meanings offered by a particular media programme. Hall's concept of 'preferred readings' was also crucial in examining the processes used by readers/viewers to produce meanings, although this approach assumed that the text, ultimately, 'proffered' its meaning, (Fiske, 2001: 145-146) privileging certain readings. Nonetheless, as Hall argued the encoding may 'pre-fer but cannot prescribe or guarantee' the

decoding since the former 'will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate' (Hall, 1980: 135). This initial model, then, developed into the theory of 'articulation' (Hall, 1986) in which the text 'speaks' its meanings but does not control reader's responses, as the reader's social situation is also central to its production of meaning (Fiske, 2001: 146). What this means according to Hall is that there must be 'some degree of reciprocity between encoding and decoding moments' to successfully communicate messages. However, such correspondence is constructed, 'a product of an articulation between two distinct moments' where the encoding cannot secure which decodings viewers will use (Hall, 1980: 136). Hall further identifies 'three hypothetical positions from which decodings of a televisual discourse may be constructed' (*ibid*). The first position is 'the dominant-hegemonic position' which is assumed by the professional broadcasters and articulated through the professional code (Storey, 1999:78). The second position is 'the *negotiated code* or position' which will be adopted by most viewers and where the decoding 'contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements' (Hall 1980:137). This means that the 'televisual discourse is negotiated through and in terms of the situated conditions of the viewer' (Storey 1999: 78). The third position is 'the oppositional code' and 'is occupied by the viewer who recognises the preferred code of the televisual discourse but who none the less chooses to decode within an alternative frame of reference' (*ibid*).

Johnson's approach to the 'circuit' illustrates that 'all cultural products go through the moments shown in the following diagram' (Johnson et al., 2004: 37):



Moreover, Johnson argues that ‘all cultural products, [...] require to be produced, but the conditions of their production cannot be inferred by scrutinising them as “texts”’ [...] we have to understand specific conditions of consumption or reading (1996:583). In this respect, Johnson’s model represents an advance to Hall since in his ‘circuit’ conditions of production and consumption were neglected. In Hall’s approach the focus stayed in the ways in which meaning(s) was produced by both the professional encoders and the audience receiving the message(s). Following on from Johnson, the ‘cultural circuit’ also grants every day life the ‘starting point’ as well as the ‘end point or result of the process’ (Johnson et al., 2004: 37). What this means is that any text is intertwined with our everyday lives. Most importantly though, is the fact that this approach is not just restricted to cultural studies and according to Johnson

(2004) ‘resembles some basic principles of hermeneutics’ (2004: 38). It is within these parameters that Paul Ricoeur’s ‘arc’ complements and expands the cultural studies ‘circuit’.

For this thesis, Ricoeur’s writings and arguments have been useful in mapping out the intricate relationships that emerged between author, texts and readers’ responses in this research. Nonetheless, this framework was never intended as a superseding theoretical perspective or as part of the methodological approach to this thesis as a whole. It was conceived, however, as a supplement to the cultural studies ‘cultural circuit’ with a special emphasis on reading. Thus, to understand how this framework has assisted me in the process of thinking through the different connections between author, text and readers, a succinct summary of Ricoeur’s theories on reading becomes necessary as well as its contribution to the ‘cultural circuit’.

Ricoeur distinguishes three moments in the ‘arc of mimesis or representation’ (Johnson et al., 2004: 247) which he names *mimesis1*, *mimesis2* and *mimesis3* (Ricoeur, 1984:53). *Mimesis1* corresponds to the ‘stage of practical experience’ (*ibid*), that is, human ‘living, acting and suffering’ (*ibid*) or what within the cultural studies circuit corresponds to any reader’s everyday life. This moment or stage, also referred as ‘prefiguration’ by Ricoeur, is necessary insofar as the representation of human ‘living, acting and suffering’ by authors to give it to readers ‘who receive it and thereby change their acting’ (*ibid*) is only possible by the existence of prior human living experience. In Ricoeur’s own words: ‘to imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality’ (*ibid*, 64).

The second moment, *mimesis*² or ‘configuration’ according to Ricoeur constitutes the ‘pivot of this analysis as [...] it opens up the world of the plot and institutes [...] the literariness of the work of literature’ (*ibid*, 53). The role of *mimesis*² consists of ‘constructing the mediation between time and narrative by demonstrating emplotment’s mediating role in the mimetic process’ (*ibid*, 54). This means that ‘configuration’ places its emphasis on the world of the text itself and on the different ways in which the human ‘living, acting and suffering’ have been represented under a particular ‘schema’ or genre which in turn ‘structure readers’ expectations and aid them in recognizing the formal rule, the genre, or the type exemplified by the narrated story’ (*ibid*, 76).

The moment that interests me most within Ricoeur’s ‘arc’, is *mimesis*³ since it ‘marks the intersection between the world of the text and the world of the listener or the reader [...]’ (1988:159). During such process, the ‘configuration’ of the text is transformed into ‘refiguration’ (*ibid*, 159). Within the ‘refiguration’ moment or *mimesis*³ itself, Ricoeur identifies three reading moments alongside ‘three neighbouring, yet distinct, disciplines’:

(1) the strategy as concocted by the author and directed toward the reader; (2) the inscription of this strategy within a literary configuration; and (3) the response of the reader considered either as a reading subject or as the receiving public (1988:160).

Ricoeur’s first reading moment corresponds to the analysis of ‘the techniques by means of which a work is made communicable’ rather than ‘the alleged creation process of the work’ (1988:160). This moment would ‘fall within the field of rhetoric, inasmuch as rhetoric governs the art by means of which orators aim at persuading their listeners’ but at the same time and by bringing authorial strategies to the forefront Ricoeur is by no means ‘denying the semantic autonomy of the text’ (Ricoeur in Valdés, 1991:390). The second

moment focuses rather on the textual strategies used by the author, that is, Allende's 'strategies of persuasion' or Allende's ways of writing (Ricoeur, 1988: 159) which can in turn be identified by her readers. The relevance of this moment though resides in the readers' responses to the 'stratagems of the implied author'² (*ibid*, 167) and here is where Ricoeur's theory of reading moves into a 'phenomenology to explore the multiple ways in which a work [...] *affects* the reader' (*ibid*, 398-9) at an individual level. In this sense reading is presented by Ricoeur as a 'dialectic' that allows the existence of dialogues between reader/author which 'make reading an *expérience vive*, a truly vital experience' (1988: 169). This 'truly vital experience' that Ricoeur is referring to corresponds to the intersection between Allende's world and the world of the readers. This relationship is understood not only in terms of how readers respond differently to the same texts, but also in terms of how readers make meanings of the text and relate them to their own lives, that is, a 'phenomenological psychology of reading' according to Ricoeur (1988:167). There have been partial moves to acknowledge this phenomenological psychology of reading in some feminist audience studies (Ang 1985, Radway 1984). As Johnson et al (2004) explain this would consist of 'some account of the significance of the world of the text in the world of the reader and also the reader's own applications of these features to their own lives' (2004:252).

In the context of this thesis, a close connection between the moments of Ricoeur's theory and this thesis' structure can be established. Chapters two and three address two important moments within Ricoeur's reading process. Chapter

² These 'stratagems' include concepts such as 'reader's concretization of places of indeterminacy' since the text is always incomplete (Ricoeur, 1988: 167), the 'wandering viewpoint', that is, 'a continual interplay between modified expectations and transformed memories' (*ibid*, 168) and finally readers' search of coherence in an attempt to familiarize the unfamiliar (*ibid*, 169).

two concentrates on the specificity of the British and Spanish reading groups' publics. What this chapter does is to establish similarities and differences between specific reading publics - British and Spanish reading groups – and how such specificity may affect their response to Allende's texts from a collective rather than individual basis. According to Ricoeur, competent readers constitute themselves as such by participating 'in the sedimented expectations of the general reading public' (1988:167). Chapter three on the other hand deals with some aspects of Allende's authorial strategies – as well as those of her publishers – whose purpose is to make her work reach potential readers who, persuaded by such strategies, finally buy and read her novels. Following on from this, chapters four to nine focus rather on the features identified by readers as the textual strategies employed by the author, Allende's 'strategies of persuasion' (Ricoeur, 1988: 159) or Allende's ways of writing. Also these chapters analyse the production or dialogues that exist between the 'world of the text' and the 'world of the reader' situated within Allende's novels and the British and Spanish readers respectively.

From Theory to Research: From Encoding/Decoding to the 'Nationwide'

Audience

It was David Morley's study on *The 'Nationwide' Audience* (1980) that engaged with Hall's theoretical framework and tested his model granting viewers an active role. Morley's groundbreaking move was to examine the decoding processes made a "real" but socially structured audience. Nevertheless, this first move by Morley to grant audiences an interpretative status had its own

limitations. In a critical postscript to his study, Morley acknowledged under 'semiological problems' first the tendency to present the message or preferred meaning rather than 'understanding the production of meaning' (1992: 120). Second he highlighted the shortcomings brought by understanding the decoding as 'a single act of reading' rather than as a 'set of processes' that could involved 'attentiveness, relevance or comprehension [...] for a single audience member in front of the screen' (*ibid*, 121). Thirdly, Morley recognised the problems emerging by employing the concept of 'preferred reading' for the analysis of texts 'outside the realm of news/documentary/current affairs', that is, how this concept could be understood within other genres such as the soap opera (*ibid*, 122). Alongside the 'semiological problems' the *Nationwide* research also presented several 'sociological problems' (Morley 1992: 125). Ann Gray noted the 'contrived setting' (Gray, 2003: 131) of the viewing since this did not take place within the domestic environment of the viewers. Morley equally identified that there was an 'overemphasis' in dealing with class as structural factor whereas age, ethnicity and gender were not treated in such a systematic way as class was (Morley, 1992:125). Despite the limitations of Morley's study, his early work following on from Hall's encoding/decoding model is essential to understand 'cultural consumption as a structured and situated practice' (Storey, 1999: 81). The following sections therefore present a selection of audience-led cultural consumption studies which I found relevant and have contributed to situate theoretically as well as empirically my own research. I begin by critically assessing the importance of two classic studies: Ien Ang *Watching Dallas* and Janice Radway *Reading the Romance*. The abiding interest of these studies does not only lay with their innovative approaches to audiences but more importantly

for how they deal with the complex question of popularity which is at the core of this research with Allende's readers.

a) Ien Ang: *Watching 'Dallas': Soap Opera and the Melodramatic*

Imagination

Ang's research on *Dallas* (1985) became a source of inspiration for my own on Allende's readers for several reasons. To begin with, Ang's study was audience led by exploring *Dallas*' popularity through the letters of Dutch fans. These letters came mostly from 'girls or women', except from three out of the forty-two replies received, which were from 'boys or men' (1985: 10). This highlighted the gendered nature of her study which in turn led Ang to examine politically and from a feminist perspective whether watching *Dallas* was good or bad for women (1985:118). Nonetheless, what mostly interested me from Ang's research was how she approached *Dallas*' popularity by focusing on the complex aspect of pleasure. Ang's concern with pleasure led her to understand her viewers' responses which, in some cases, and despite acknowledging the unrealistic nature of *Dallas*, showed how they emotionally engaged with the ups and downs of the Ewing family. This is what Ang referred to as 'emotional realism' (1985:41) since what viewers recognised as "real" in *Dallas* was not adequate knowledge of the world but a subjective experience of it, that is, a 'structure of feeling' (*ibid*, 45). Ang's 'structure of feeling' has become particularly useful in this research since it enabled me to understand readers' engagement with Allende's characters and their circumstances as shall be seen in chapters four, five and six. Not only this, Ang's analysis further explored how women viewers' melodramatic identifications with *Dallas*' characters

encouraged them to fantasise and explore new subject positions which may be considered risky to adopt in the “real” world. This exploration of new subject positions was also significant in this research since it helped me making sense of some of the women readers’ responses to Allende in *Paula* as shall be seen in chapter six.

b) Janice Radway: *Reading the Romance*

Radway’s publication of *Reading the Romance* (1984) became a unique source of inspiration for my own research with Allende’s readers. Radway’s initial main goal was to find suitable means to analyse what key elements made a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ romance according to its “real” readers. In other words, what makes romance(s) popular. To achieve this, Radway approached her study combining textual analysis as well as the interpretations which romance fans made of the texts. Before exploring the textual features as well as the women readers’ responses to the romances they chose, a significant part of Radway’s project also considered the importance of ‘the processes and strategies of romance publication and marketing’ (Gray, 2003: 135). Although Radway acknowledges that the popularity of romances is partly due to sophisticated selling techniques she still argued for engaging with questions relating to ‘what a romance *is* for the woman who buys and reads it. To know that, we must know what romance readers make of the words they find on a page’ (1987:11). For my own research, this analysis within the ‘social and material situation within which romance reading occurs’ (Radway, 1997: 70) made me realise that Allende’s ‘celebritisation’ (Evans, 2005) alongside the discourses surrounding her public

representation were vital in trying to understand her popularity as well as the readers responses to her novels.

Another key element in Radway's research was the exploration of the 'conditions organising women's private lives which likewise contribute to the possibility of regular romance reading' (Radway, 1997: 70). In this sense, Radway recognised that a clear distinction needed to be made between the significance of the act of reading in itself and the content of the texts encountered by her readers. Radway's separation between the act of reading and the texts read made me consider how British and Spanish readers' readings of Allende may have been mediated or influenced by the different social conditions in which British and Spanish reading groups were organised respectively and the impact this may have upon their interpretations of Allende's texts as it shall be seen throughout the thesis.

What I also found fascinating was how Radway's analysis also provided with an explanation between the 'intense need [the Smithton women felt] to be nurtured and cared for despite their universal claim to being happily married' (Radway 1997: 72) and how not only the act of reading romances but also their content as texts seemed to redress the needs these women felt. Thus, in searching for a means to explain how particular desires were satisfied by reading romances, Radway turned to Nancy Chodorow's psychoanalytic theories. According to Radway, these were particularly useful because they could explain 'the twin objects of desire underlying romance reading, that is, the desire for the nurturance represented and promised by the preoedipal mother and for the power and autonomy associated with the oedipal father' (*ibid*). Although my analysis did not incorporate Chodorow's theories to the extent that Radway's did, it did

nonetheless examined the role reading groups played in “nurturing” women readers, especially in the Spanish context as shall be seen later on in the thesis.

Another influential aspect of Radway’s research was how she organised and conducted her fieldwork with her romance readers. Radway employed questionnaires, individual interviews and group discussions among thirty odd women in an American town she called ‘Smithton’. What was mostly attractive from Radway’s approach was how she listened to what her readers had to say about their readings and how their comments informed her analytical framework without any theoretical perspective being imposed from the top. In other words, her ethnographic approach to reading was immensely valuable for my own because it did not assert to produce truth or knowledge but rather gave salient insights into the reasons why romance reading was so central to the lives of the Smithton women. Thus, what was significant of Radway’s ethnographic take on reading was how her method(s) of enquiry facilitated a ‘less hierarchical and more personal research environment’ (Brown 1994:14). Nonetheless, and despite her innovative approach to readers, as Radway later recognised in her new introduction to the English edition of *Reading the Romance* (Verso, 1987), her research had fallen short in the way she exclusively focused on gender and neglected other sociological variables as well as how these would ‘intersect with gender to produce varying, even conflicting engagements with the romance form’ (1987: 69). Equally unsatisfactory was Radway’s ‘political recommendations and conclusions’ (Van Zoonen, 2004: 112). What this meant was that Radway’s approach was failing to bridge feminism and romance reading since ‘Radway the researcher, is a feminist and *not* a romance fan; the Smithton women, the researched, are romance readers and *not* feminists’ (Ang, 1998:526).

In other words, Radway perpetuated a construction of romance reading and feminism 'as mutually exclusive' by situating the feminist researcher in a position where 'it is neither possible nor necessary to resort to the vicarious fulfilment of romantic desires' (Van Zoonen, 2004:112). Moreover, and according to Ang, what Radway's analysis also neglected was 'any careful account of the *pleasurableness* of the pleasure of romance reading' (1998:527), that is, Radway became 'preoccupied with its [pleasure] effects rather than its mechanisms' (*ibid*, 528) ultimately failing to see its empowering effects for women in their everyday lives (*ibid*, 530).

Cultural Consumption in Context(s): Audiences and Their Everyday Lives

Despite the fact that Ang and Radway's projects have been the most influential to the theoretical and empirical developments of my own research, in particular for their insights into the popularity question, there are also a number of studies which have been equally significant part to the understanding of audiences. Whereas Ang and Radway looked at how their viewers and readers appropriated and made use of *Dallas* and romances respectively, other approaches have shifted the emphasis to the context(s) of the audience in their everyday lives. In other words, 'rather than begin with a cultural text and show how people appropriate and make it meaningful [...] a focus on the contexts of media consumption show how these constrain the ways in which appropriation and meaning can take place' (Storey, 1999:121). In this respect, Morley's limitations in *Nationwide* resulted in a move from a study of the decoding processes to that of the viewing context where the emphasis rested in examining

the 'context and social practice associated with popular forms' (Gray, 2003, 132-33). This was the focus of his research project *Family Television* (1986) where he brought together what has been considered 'separate provinces of different disciplinary approaches –how television is interpreted (literary/semiological approaches) and how television is used (sociological approaches) (Storey, 1999:113). In *Family Television* Morley was able to 'demonstrate the ways in which the cultural consumption of television always involves much more than isolated individuals making particular interpretations of specific programmes [...] it is above all a social practice' (*ibid*, 114). Among the studies which further developed Morley's approach was Ann Gray's *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Technology* (1992). Gray's study sought to understand how women made use of the VCR (video cassette recorder) in their homes and was able to successfully combine research areas which had been kept separate such as 'home-based leisure, audience studies, textual analysis and domestic technology' (Storey, 1999:116). Such interdisciplinary methodology became necessary since Gray realised while conducting her interviews that the uses women made of the VCR were closely intertwined with different areas of the women's lives such as domestic labour (Gray, 2003:108). Moreover, Gray reached interesting conclusions regarding the gendering of technology in the form of the VCR although she was careful not to fall for essentialist explanations regarding masculine and feminine modes of viewing. She clearly stated that both masculine and feminine modes of viewing should be explained 'within the domestic context and the social relations of power which appear to prevail' (1992:126).

Likewise Morley and Gray studies, the work of Dutch media theorist Joke Hermes (1995) *Reading Women's Magazines* aimed to 'understand how women's magazines are read [...] that readers are producers of meaning rather than cultural dopes of the media institutions' (1995: 5). However, and unlike previous studies done with women's magazines, Hermes argued for 'a more postmodern view, in which respect rather than concern [...] would have a central place' (*ibid*, 1). From such position, she tried 'to reconstruct the diffuse genre or set of genres that is called women's magazines and [...] how they become meaningful exclusively through the perception of their readers' (*ibid*, 6). Hermes further argued that 'texts acquire meaning only in the interaction between readers and texts and that analysis of the text on its own is never enough to reconstruct these meanings' (*ibid*, 10). As John Storey (1999) explains, Hermes's significant contribution of her work consists in 'having broken decisively with an approach to cultural analysis in which the researcher insists on the need to establish first the substantive meaning of a text or texts and then how audience may or may not read the text to make this meaning' (1999:123).

Research projects such as those of Morley, Gray and Hermes – although they did not offer insights into the popularity question as Ang and Radway did - moved me to consider the importance of Allende's readers' everyday lives that is, how meaning(s) is produced in the specific context of the reading groups and how the meaning(s) generated through reading Allende helped in particular British and Spanish women readers to make sense of the everyday lives.

Conclusion

This chapter has situated this research within the theoretical framework of feminist audience studies as well as cultural studies in general. This framework has been motivated by the shift in emphasis occurring within feminist audience-led research where a move from text to viewer and/or reader has become necessary to critically understand the popularity of any text, as seen in the case of Ang and Radway's studies. Both studies have inspired this research with Allende's readers as well as highlighted that Allende's popularity is impossible to explain by means of textual analysis only. This chapter has also revealed that in order to make sense of Allende's readers' responses to her novels, an insight into what is involved in reading any text is needed. Thus, by considering Ricoeur's approaches to reading, this chapter has established that an understanding of Allende's popularity – following on from the working definitions of the "popular"- requires an exploration of the relationship between production, text(s), readers and readers' everyday lives.

Chapter Two

Researching Readers: From Reading to Negotiating New Identities

Introduction

This chapter presents the main methods used to conduct the research with Allende's readers and it is overall informed by the theoretical approaches discussed in chapter one.

It discusses in detail how I found potential Allende readers in Britain and Spain as well as what kind of methodological implications the use of reading groups had for the further development of the project.

It examines the use of group questionnaires for drawing conclusions on the specificity of the British and Spanish groups when compared among themselves, cross-culturally or within larger samples. These larger samples correspond to Jenny Hartley's survey among 350 groups in the UK, and Blanca Calvo's³ among 30 groups in Spain.

Finally, this chapter addresses the methods used to keep a record of readers' discussions as well as the mechanisms employed to select, edit and interpret readers' readings.

³ Blanca Calvo is the pioneer librarian from Guadalajara who, approximately twenty years ago, formed the first Spanish reading groups.

Locating the Research Methodologically

In retelling the story of this research I am aware of the temptation to represent the research project as a seamless narrative in which the next step seems inevitable. The dead-ends, the U-turns, the frustrations and the despair tend to get written out as the logic of the research project is imposed retrospectively (Stacey, 1994:50).

I found Jackie Stacey's words inspiring when confronted with the tricky task of thinking back through and 'retelling the story' (*ibid*) of this research from a methodological perspective. Stacey's own research on female audiences in the 1940s and 1950s in Britain showed me that, on many occasions, some of the various methodological approaches initially taken on board by the researcher, needed to be renegotiated or abandoned due to the unforeseen circumstances the researcher is faced with as the project progresses. It is therefore my intention when retelling the methodological history of this project, to move away whenever possible from the idea of a 'seamless narrative' (*ibid*). For this reason, I plan not to share only its successful moments but also its moments of renegotiation although this may frustrate for the readers of this project the 'pleasures of discovery, recognition and resolution' which govern a straightforward cause and effect relationship of most narratives (*ibid*, 51).

To start this retelling process, it is vital to remember that the primary aim of this research is to interrogate Isabel Allende's popularity cross culturally through a sample of readers' responses to Allende's writings and discourses surrounding her public representation in Britain and Spain. This interest in readers originates within a larger cultural studies' tradition which strived to establish audiences as active producers of meaning beyond textual determinism. In the context of this research, the focus on Allende's readers does not signify that ultimately the "true" answers to Allende's popularity lay with her readers.

This is just a part, albeit an important one, which aims at completing the puzzle of her popularity.

Allende's Readers, Where Are You?

One of the initial challenges set by this project was how I was going to organise my research with readers, and more importantly, where I was going to find Allende readers in Britain and Spain. In the mist of this uncertainty and anxiety, reading groups emerged as an unforeseen solution. I did not know of their existence until a colleague at work who knew about my project mentioned them to me. His wife was a member of a reading group. Initially, this is why I started considering reading groups as a major source to find my potential Allende readers. After the first contact with a reading group, members of this group told me about other groups which may have been interested and willing to participate in the project. Thus, by word of mouth, I was able to find details about other British reading groups in the area to complete the fieldwork in Britain as the following table shows:

Table 1: British groups' participation

BRITISH GROUPS	APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF MEMBERS REGULARLY ATTENDING
Leicester Reading Group	6
Nottingham Reading Group 1	8-14
Nottingham Reading Group 2	5-11
Nottingham Library	10-15
Birmingham Reading Group 1	8
Birmingham Reading Group 2	6
Bingham Reading Group	5-10
Southwell Reading Group	10
Lincoln Library	9

Trying to replicate a similar experience in the Spanish context proved discouraging until I discovered an article on Spanish reading groups in the free magazine which is normally published with the Spanish newspaper *El País* on Sundays. The five page article titled 'Operación Lectura' was a mine of information. I was able to contact Blanca Calvo who helped me organise seven out of the ten Spanish reading group meetings in Guadalajara and its nearby towns as the following table shows:

Table 2: Spanish groups' participation

SPANISH GROUPS	APPROXIMATE NUMBER OF MEMBERS REGULARLY ATTENDING
Campanillas Reading Group (Málaga)	20-25
El Palo Reading Group (Málaga)	20-25
El Pozo Reading Group (Madrid)	4
Biblioteca de Guadalajara 1	20-25
Biblioteca de Guadalajara 2	30
Biblioteca de Azuqueca 1(Guadalajara)	25
Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2 (Guadalajara)	20
Biblioteca de Azuqueca 3 (Guadalajara)	30
Biblioteca de Fontanar (Guadalajara)	13
Biblioteca de Marchamalo (Guadalajara)	10-15

Overall, both tables show that I attended a total of 19 reading groups' discussions and that I listened to and observed around 300 readers.

As regards to the geographical distribution of the groups, all the British participating in this research are located within the geographical area known as the English Midlands. Except for the Bingham and Southwell groups, both small towns in the county of Nottinghamshire, the rest are located in the big cities of Birmingham, Leicester, Nottingham and Lincoln. Among these cities, Birmingham is the largest and most important in terms of economic growth⁴. Lincoln, on the other hand, is the smallest leaving Nottingham and Leicester as the in between. However, although Nottingham accounts for a small population

⁴ Information available online from: <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk>. [Accessed 14 April 2009]

compared to Birmingham, it is considered a fast growing city with the highest GDP of any English city except London in 2004⁵.

The towns of Bingham and Southwell are relatively close to Nottingham, nine and fourteen miles (14.4 and 22.4 km) respectively. Bingham is considered a dormitory town to Nottingham although there are approximately 20 industrial units offering employment in the town⁶. Southwell, on the other hand, is considered a residence area for Nottingham's affluent families.

Table 3: British Groups Geographical Characteristics⁷

Name of location	Type of location	Region	Population
Nottingham	city	East Midlands	288,700 (2007)
Bingham, Nottinghamshire	town	East Midlands	9,151 (2007)
Southwell, Nottighamshire	town	East Midlands	7,379 (2007)
Birmingham	city	West Midlands	1,010,200 (2007)
Leicester	city	East Midlands	292,600 (2007)
Lincoln	city	East Midlands	87,800 (2007)

⁵ Office for National Statistics. *Sub-regional: Gross Value Added1 (GVA) at Current Basic Prices*. [online]. Available from: http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme-compendia/regional_snapshot_2006/SubregionalGVA.xls. [Accessed 14 April 2009]

⁶ Information available online from: <http://www.nottsheritagegateway.org.uk/places/ingham.htm> [Accessed 14 April 2009]

⁷ The information selected to create the table is available online at: <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=15106>
<http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/Product.asp?vlnk=13893>
[Accessed 14 April 2009]

In the Spanish context, only two of the groups are located in Southern Spain whereas the remaining eight are located in the center of Spain, mainly in the Guadalajara province. The two groups in Southern Spain, Campanillas and El Palo, are considered ‘barrios’ (‘suburbs’) within the ten districts in which the city of Málaga is subdivided. These districts are ‘divisiones territoriales de gestión’ (‘administrative territory divisions’) which are co-ordinated by ‘Juntas de Distrito’ (‘District Boards’)⁸. Some of these districts are rather large population wise and could be considered towns if compared to the English Bingham and Southwell. Similarly, El Pozo is a ‘barrio’ (‘suburb’) within the city of Madrid. This is a rather peculiar case since El Pozo was ‘un barrio de chabolas’ (‘a shanty suburb’) until a group of Jesuits who arrived in 1955 helped the residents – mostly construction workers and their families - to organise and create cooperatives, ‘dispensarios’ (‘clinics’)⁹ and schools¹⁰. This socio-economic profile matches at its best the aspirational outlook of most Spanish reading groups as shall be discussed later on in the chapter.

The groups from Azuqueca de Henares, Fontanar and Marchamalo vary considerably in population size as the table below shows. Nonetheless, and similarly to Bingham and Southwell, these are all close to a main city, in this case Guadalajara. The closest is Marchamalo, 5 km, followed in ascendant order by Fontanar, 10 km and Azuqueca de Henares, 14 km. More importantly, all of these towns as well as the city of Guadalajara are close to the capital Madrid –

⁸ Information available online from: <http://www.ayto-malaga.es> [Accessed 14 April 2009]

⁹ Although I translated ‘dispensario’ as ‘clinic’, these establishments did not only provided medical care but also offered food and clothing for the poor.

¹⁰ Information available online from: http://www.nodo50.org/foroporlamemoria/documentos/2004/pllanos_30042004.htm [Accessed 14 April 2009]

Azuqueca de Henares being 55 km from Madrid¹¹. This proximity to Madrid offered these particular reading groups an opportunity to travel to the city to enjoy different cultural attractions as commented by the main librarian in Guadalajara. This feature makes sense within the strong educational base most Spanish reading groups originated as shall be discussed later on in the chapter. What this implies is that although most reading groups in Spain are located in less developed socio-economic areas, this does not necessarily mean that Spanish group members are unable to benefit from the cultural opportunities that big urban areas such as Birmingham, Nottingham or Leicester may offer to the British readers.

Table 4: Spanish Groups Geographical Characteristics¹²

Name of Location	Type of Location	Population	Region
Guadalajara	city	83,609 (2008, INE)	Guadalajara (Castilla-La Mancha)
Azuqueca de Henares, (Guadalajara)	municipio	30,794 (2008, INE)	Guadalajara (Castilla-La Mancha)
Fontanar, (Guadalajara)	town	902	Guadalajara (Castilla-La Mancha)

¹¹ Information available online from: <http://www.guadalajara.es/es> [Accessed 14 April 2009]

¹² The information selected to create the table is available online from:

<http://www.ayto-malaga.es>

<http://www.munimadrid.es>

<http://www.guadalajara.es/es>

http://www.dguadalajara.es/municipios/azuqueca_henares.htm

<http://www.dguadalajara.es/municipios/marchamalo.htm>

<http://www.dguadalajara.es/municipios/fontanar.htm>

[Accessed 14 April 2009]

Marchamalo, (Guadalajara)	town	4,792 (2006, INE)	Guadalajara (Castilla-La Mancha)
El Pozo del Tío Raimundo ¹³ , (Madrid)	suburb (barrio de Vallecas)	5,84 million (2005, INE)	Madrid
El Palo, (Málaga)	suburb, belonging to district 'Este' in Málaga	65,881 in the district; 566,447 (Málaga, 2008)	Málaga (Andalucía)
Campanillas, (Málaga)	suburb, belonging to district 'Campanillas' in Málaga	16,177 in the district	Málaga (Andalucía)

Despite the above differences emerging within the geographical and socio-economic characteristics of British and Spanish reading groups, the choice of reading groups as my main methodological tool can be regarded as a successful decision not only in terms of accessing the readers' worlds but also as a means of experiencing first hand the mechanisms readers employed in making sense of Allende's readings. Nonetheless, this choice did not come about without posing some initial doubts and reservations as shall be discussed in the following section.

¹³ The figure of 5,84 million refers to Madrid metropolitan area, that is, urban area and suburbs. Also the information regarding the economy refers to the capital as a whole and not to the specific area of El Pozo.

Reading Groups and Their Methodological Implications

a) Choosing Reading Groups as Method

Reading groups brought some implications for how I had originally conceived the project in methodological terms. I initially thought of finding my own readers, grouping them together and forming focus groups. The idea of focus groups as a possible methodological tool emerged as a result of the numerous readings I had done on qualitative methodologies, ethnography and focus groups (Alasuutari, 1996; Bloor et al., 2000; Fetterman, 1989; Gray, 2003; Gunter, 2000; Hammersley, 1988; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Krueger, 1994, 1998, 1998a; Krueger and Casey, 2000; Krueger and King 1998, Le Compte and Schensul, 1999, 1999a, 1999b, 1999c; Morgan, 1988, 1998; Morgan and Scannell, 1998; Riley, 1990; Silverman, 1997; Spradley, 1979; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990; Strauss, 1987; Van Maanen, 1979). At this early stage in the research, and to be able to find Allende's readers, I was also contemplating using similar methods to Ang and Stacey who placed an advertisement in women's magazines to elicit their potential informants. In both instances this method proved successful and provided interesting and valuable material to work with.

Although the idea of focus groups originally appeared to suit the needs of my research piece, as a means of facilitating the dialogic structure I intended to establish with Allende's readers' readings, I began to consider that reading groups could better fulfil the same objectives. Perhaps the reason why I was reluctant to let the idea of focus groups completely evaporate was that I was confident that these were offering me the respectability and recognition attached

to such qualitative method of inquiry. Focus groups had been successfully used in several academic research projects such as Morley's *Nationwide* and Radway's romance readers.

Alongside these thoughts, the first couple of meetings with British reading groups had already taken place. From one week to the next, I found myself in the field not quite knowing what to make of reading groups. During these sessions, I attempted to follow the focus groups' techniques I had read about and tried my best to adapt them to my new research context with reading groups. However, I soon recognised that reading groups were not focus groups, but more importantly, I realised the potential reading groups offered in successfully carrying out my research project.

The main differences between reading groups and focus groups consisted in that the latter were mostly made up of complete strangers (Steward and Shamdasani, 1990). In contrast to this, members in reading groups belonged to a small community of friends, relatives or neighbours who had known each other for years, especially in the British context as shall be seen later in the chapter. Also, social researchers look for homogeneity in focus groups and aim to find participants who share certain characteristics such as age, gender or occupation, so self-disclosure occurs as they perceive certain degrees of likeness among themselves (Krueger and Casey, 2000). Though this scientific selection process does not occur with reading groups, it does not necessarily imply that they are not homogeneous. On the contrary, their homogeneity takes place through their "natural" self-selective processes, such as friendship, common hobbies or similar social background. Another difference is that reading group numbers would vary from group to group, whereas focus groups' numbers should only range from a

minimum of five to a maximum of twelve participants (Morgan, 1988; Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990; Krueger and Casey, 2000). Last but not least, is the absence of a reading group leader or moderator in the British groups, whereas in focus groups, the moderator is a key figure in the success of any led research of this kind (Krueger 1994; Krueger and Casey, 2000). These differences between focus and reading groups made me realise not only the gap existing between both, but also that these variations were to be exploited to my advantage.

By discussing an Allende book in a reading group environment, I was just asking a group of regular reading enthusiasts to engage in an activity that they not only considered pleasurable – as shall be seen later in the chapter - but also were accustomed to. Reading and discussing books is the “essence” of reading group meetings and for that reason alone, I found there was no real need to artificially create a research context which offered no guarantees of a better insight into Allende’s readers’ readings. Nonetheless, there are still specific issues to each of the research contexts and methodological approach to reading groups that need further exploring in the following sections.

b) Choosing which Allende Book to Read

Some of the British groups had not read Allende in the past and therefore their choice of Allende had been informed by me, though I did not choose which title was to be read. Nevertheless, after attending some of the British group sessions, I discovered that several individuals in the British reading groups had read an Allende book in the past, outside the reading group setting - *The House of the Spirits* being the most read and best-known. This fact made me realise that after

all, Allende was not a complete stranger among British readers, as I had originally thought.

In the Spanish context, however, Allende's novels had been read assiduously. For most Spanish groups, Allende had been read in the past¹⁴ and was a well-known author, even a favourite among some. Some members of *El Palo* reading group had been very explicit explaining that they would buy any new Allende title even before it would be read by the group.

Another interesting example of how Allende appears to be such a well-known author in Spain is exemplified by the only Madrid reading group. This group, although very small since it had only been running for a couple of months, was about to discuss their first book when I contacted them in January 2003. Interestingly, their first book was *Cuentos de Eva Luna* by Isabel Allende. This choice had occurred for two reasons. First most reading groups in Spain¹⁵ are run by public libraries. These hold and provide the titles available so members in the groups do not have to buy a copy. For each reading group running, a book list is composed and updated dependant on the budget that libraries and local authorities agree on each year. Still, this implies that readers are not involved in the selection of titles. For most of the Spanish new established reading groups Allende was a given choice. Second, librarians¹⁶ explained that they believe Allende is included in these lists because *Cuentos de Eva Luna's* short stories are

¹⁴ Most Spanish reading groups had read more than one Allende title in the past and therefore agreed to re-read one of them to discuss it with me. Readers felt they would not be able to contribute to the discussion if they did not re-read the book since it had been some time since they had last read it.

¹⁵ Reading groups' formation in Britain and Spain will be explored in more detail later on in the chapter. The example provided by *Cuentos de Eva Luna* helps to illustrate how "popular", that is, largely consumed Allende is in Spain, to the extent that she is being chosen by cultural authorities to become part of a reading list for new established reading groups.

¹⁶ I have used 'librarians' in the plural because the same title *Cuentos de Eva Luna* was included in one of the Málaga groups and the librarian expressed similar views on the reasons behind the choice as the librarian in charge of Madrid's group.

ideal for initiating somebody into reading, especially if some of these reading groups had just evolved from literacy groups like the Madrid group. This seems to indicate that Allende's popularity may be connected to a perception of being an "easy read" for certain groups of readers. However, she is also "good" enough to be included in most of the Spanish groups' reading lists that are compiled guided by the strong educational drive reminiscent of the groups' origins.

For the comparative purposes of this research¹⁷, that is, between British and Spanish reading groups, it could be argued that there was a lack of symmetry between the two research contexts, in particular the way in which Allende already enjoyed a certain recognition and visibility in the Spanish groups compared to the British and the different groups' origins in both countries. But rather than seeing these initial divergences as a barrier to the development of this research, I recognised them as integral part of it, foregrounding the specificity of the diverse responses produced by British and Spanish readers.

Among the British and Spanish groups, the most common choice was *The House of the Spirits*. Five out of the nine groups read it in Britain and six out of ten in Spain. One group read *Daughter of Fortune* in Britain and two in Spain. *Paula* was read by two groups in Britain and one in Spain. Finally, only one group read *Eva Luna* in Britain and only one group read *Portrait in Sepia* in Spain.

¹⁷ The comparative dimension of this thesis is not intended as to compare the like with the like of British and Spanish reading groups. Instead, it has to be understood as a means of enriching the main research question examining Allende's cross-cultural popularity.

Table 5: British groups' reading choice

BRITISH GROUPS	TITLE READ
Leicester Reading Group	<i>The House of the Spirits</i>
Nottingham Reading Group 1	<i>Daughter of Fortune</i>
Nottingham Reading Group 2	<i>Eva Luna</i>
Nottingham Library	<i>The House of the Spirits</i>
Birmingham Reading Group 1	<i>Paula</i>
Birmingham Reading Group 2	<i>The House of the Spirits</i>
Bingham Reading Group	<i>The House of the Spirits</i>
Southwell Reading Group	<i>Paula</i>
Lincoln Library	<i>The House of the Spirits</i>

Table 6: Spanish groups' reading choice

SPANISH GROUPS	TITLE READ
Campanillas Reading Group (Málaga)	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i>
El Palo Reading Group (Málaga)	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i>
El Pozo Reading Group (Madrid)	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i>
Biblioteca de Guadalajara 1	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i>
Biblioteca de Guadalajara 2	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i>
Biblioteca de Azuqueca 1 (Guadalajara)	<i>La hija de la fortuna</i>
Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2 (Guadalajara)	<i>La hija de la fortuna</i>
Biblioteca de Azuqueca 3 (Guadalajara)	<i>Retrato en sepia</i>
Biblioteca de Fontanar (Guadalajara)	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i>
Biblioteca de Marchamalo (Guadalajara)	<i>Paula</i>

c) Overcoming Initial Methodological Dilemmas: The Work of Ang, Radway and Stacey

What these previous sections have highlighted are the complexities encountered when reading groups became the main method in my inquiry. As Ang (1996) claims in her engaging work on postmodern media audiences ‘[...] the researcher has to confront very specific problems of access and interpretation, which will have a decisive impact on the shape of the eventual account that is presented [...]’(1996:100).

What I also found reassuring for my own piece of research were Ang’s references to Radway’s initial apprehension when meeting Dorothy Evans, her initial contact, and subsequently her group of romance readers. To a certain degree, I could identify with Radway’s initial fears about what kind of relationship she could develop with her romance readers. Radway’s own words clearly echoed the initial apprehension Ang is referring to:

The trepidation I felt upon embarking for Smithton slowly dissipated on the drive from the airport as Dot talked freely and fluently about the romances that were clearly an important part of her life. [...] My concern about whether I could persuade Dot’s customers to elaborate honestly about their motives for reading was unwarranted, for after an initial period of mutually felt awkwardness, we conversed frankly and with enthusiasm (1984:47).

Radway’s honest account about her ‘difficult’ moments during the initial stages of the research has been extremely valuable in the context of this project. Despite its weaknesses¹⁸, Radway’s methodological approach delivered a rich

¹⁸ In *Living Room Wars*, Ang (1996) also highlights some of Radway’s methodological flaws since according to Ang, she did not problematise the ways in which researcher/informants were positioned in her research. As a result, Radway ‘overlooks the constructivist aspect of her own enterprise’ (1996:101). Nonetheless, Radway herself addressed these issues in her introduction to the English edition of *Reading the Romance* (Verso, 1987) where the author claims that ‘my initial preoccupation with the empiricist claims of social sciences prevented me from recognizing fully that even what I look to be simple descriptions of my interviewee’s self-understandings

and interesting account, especially of how the act of reading itself - despite the content of the romances – signified more than she had initially envisaged since it ultimately empowered its readers by offering them a means of asserting their own independence as women.

Similarly, Ang's method of placing an advertisement in a popular women's magazine received several criticisms because according to Brunsdon (2000), the choice of the phrase 'odd reactions'¹⁹ used by Ang as a way of describing her own personal experience when sharing her viewing of *Dallas* with other viewers, 'overdetermined the responses to the request' (Brunsdon, 2000:149). However, Brunsdon sees Ang's formulation as 'exemplary' since 'it explicitly appeals to other viewers stating the contradiction which is the motor of the project' (*ibid*, 150). Also Jackie Stacey's research (1994) on female cinema spectators during the 1940s and 1950s in Britain took several methodological twists before she finally obtained her informants and materials by, similarly to Ang, advertising her project in two women's magazines.

Examples like Radway, Ang and Stacey made me realise that the method(s) used in a particular piece of research do not necessarily emerge without posing some difficult questions for the researcher. In most cases, there is no magical formula which guarantees that a specific methodological approach will work, even when the justification for a particular choice of method(s) may appear to be the result of a large process of trial and error as in Stacey's research. It is therefore imperative for me to emphasise once more that, in the context of

were produced through an internal organization of data and thus mediated by my own conceptual constructs and ways of seeing the world' (Radway, 1997:65).

¹⁹ The full advertisement reads the following: 'I like watching the TV serial *Dallas*, but often get odd reactions to it. Would anyone like to write and tell me why you like watching it too, or dislike it? I should like to assimilate these reactions in my university thesis. Please write to ...' (Ang, 1985:10).

this research, the large tradition of feminist audience research has supported me and helped me throughout the different stages in designing my own methodological approach working with Allende's readers. In particular, the work of Ang and Radway has been invaluable in achieving a final result.

d) Reading Groups and Me

In the British context, most reading groups had been meeting for many years and they had set up their meetings following certain routines and rituals. For this reason, I intended not to disturb the groups' routines and let them function as they "normally" would without my presence. However, certain tensions emerged between how I rationally intended not to upset "normal" group dynamics and finding my own place in the field.

After the first two British reading group meetings, I realised that to a certain degree, British readers and their reading groups' dynamics were inadvertently shaping my role in this part of the research. Becoming "invisible" to the British readers was a conscious methodological decision to render readers' responses more transparent but also as a means of feeling comfortable with the role I had taken on during this part of the research process. The "invisibility" I was seeking was also connected with issues regarding group belonging. I saw myself as the outsider and not one of them. In addition to this, and contrary to what one may think coming from a position of power as an academic researcher, I also felt completely disempowered in my role.

My first fieldwork experience in the British context was a men only reading group, the Leicester Reading group. In retrospect, this group set up a precedent for the rest of the groups to come. This group of men readers appeared

to know exactly what to say, as well as what was important and significant to the discussion, without requiring any prompting or views from me. Perhaps, this first experience reinforced my initial feelings, and being unobtrusive became necessary for the fieldwork to be successful.

Nonetheless, it would be unfair to generalise my experience since there were variations among the groups. Although in some groups, members would not necessarily ask me directly what my views were, their language would reveal that they were seeking approval of their views coming from other members or myself. For example, in the Birmingham Reading Group 1, on several occasions its women readers' words would reveal this approval seeking when using the question tag at the end of their sentences, sometimes used just to confirm some information or to make others share and express similar views as shown by the following individual comments:

A: The first time I found it really gripping as it takes place in all these countries, Chile, Perú, Lebanon, California, Spain, Argentina and Venezuela, I think this is all correct, *isn't it* [my emphasis]?

A: But she thought of her lovers, *didn't she* [my emphasis]?

A: [...] The mother has the main care of the children, *doesn't she* [my emphasis]?

D: Michael is hardly there for Paula during the whole year [...] It's always Paula and her, *isn't it* [my emphasis]?

D: It's such a chaotic house [...] She [Allende] likes a bit of order but then the chaos of this house [William Gordon's house], the children so dysfunctional, disturbed although he was a lawyer, *wasn't he* [my emphasis]?

D: All mothers feel guilty, *don't they?* About what we didn't do for our children, [directing the question at me] Do you think she [Allende] feels particularly guilty?

This could also be indicative of readers' uncertainty about giving the "right" answer, perhaps reinforced by my presence, but it worked for them as a means to obtain reassurance from the other members in the group.

Confronted with these issues, I opted to redefine and renegotiate my position according to what I perceived British readers wanted of me. I let them shape my role, perhaps for fear of jeopardizing the outcome of the fieldwork, and sessions ended up being conducted with a 'participant observation' approach. I listened and observed readers to begin with, and intervened as little as possible in what readers had to say.

Nevertheless, what I had originally perceived as a weakness in my fieldwork, by adopting a less intrusive and demanding role, turned out to be very positive since what readers had to say was not primarily aiming at satisfying my research agenda. Still towards the end of the meeting, I would have the opportunity to ask some questions so members would expand on comments that had caught my attention during the session. Now that my experience in the field with British and Spanish groups has long finished I am convinced that my approach has been consistent despite the initial hiccups, but more importantly, I was comfortable in a role I originally had trouble to come to terms with.

On one occasion though, I was asked to lead one of the British groups' sessions, the Lincoln Library Group²⁰. I was able to experience first hand how sessions would have developed in the other groups if they had followed a similar structure. For this session I prepared a list of questions based on those themes that had emerged in previous groups' discussions. This time, I was concerned that leading the group could have an impact on the material produced by this

²⁰ This was the last group I visited in Britain.

group compared to others, but my anxieties dissipated when similar results emerged in this group. During the session, every member in the group made the effort to take part in the discussion; perhaps some may have felt intimidated by my presence, but once they realised the questions were open-ended and nobody was singled out to answer them, they appeared to be reassured and relaxed. I also felt comfortable in this new role since prior to the meeting, I knew that the group wanted the session to be led by me and I had been invited to contribute rather than intrude.

Moving to the Spanish context, overall, my experience with the Spanish groups was different from the British one. In principle, the no intervention approach was also adopted when conducting the sessions in Spain since the results in the British context had been encouraging. Nevertheless, what made a substantial difference to my confidence in the Spanish context was that at this stage I could see myself as a more experienced researcher working with readers and having a better understanding of what researching readers involved. This was a direct result of having successfully finished my fieldwork with British groups.

Unlike British groups, most Spanish groups were formed not as part of an individual initiative. In Spain, they were initially created as part of a wider network of government initiatives to improve literacy according to several librarians or *agentes por la igualdad* (equality officers). The role of the *agente por la igualdad* was more of an administrative type for these reading groups and consisted in identifying pockets of illiteracy among adults in the local areas –who happened to be mostly women – and offer them workshops which not only tackled literacy but also personal development areas such as self-esteem. These

workshops had been heavily subsidised by the local authorities and once the economic support had finished, the *agente por la igualdad* alongside the public librarians decided to offer these women a way of continuing their personal development through reading groups. In *El Palo's agente por la igualdad's* own words:

[...] Aquí en El Palo, el ayuntamiento obtuvo una subvención muy grande, se localizó a un grupo de mujeres con el que trabajar el tema de la alfabetización, comenzó con una iniciativa muy particular de cuatro o cinco personas y después el grupo de lectura ha ido creciendo y ha cambiado mucho su carácter, sus características. [...] No tenían estudios por eso estaban acudiendo al grupo de alfabetización y además tenían programas paralelos para potenciar capacidades personales. Empezaron a descubrir que les gustaba eso de las rimas, el pareado y demás y se volcaron en el tema de la poesía, siempre hablando de niveles muy bajitos y bueno empezaron su andadura.

[...] Here in El Palo, the local authority obtained a large grant, then a group of women was identified to work with to improve their literacy skills, it started as a very limited initiative of four or five people, and afterwards the reading group has grown and changed its character a lot, its characteristics. [...] They [the women] had not received a formal education, that's why they were attending the literacy group and also they had parallel programs to foster personal skills. They [the women] started to discover that they liked the rhymes, couplets and so on and they threw themselves into reading poetry, always very basic though, and so they started their journey²¹.

In this respect, most of the Spanish reading groups could be regarded as highly institutionalized and therefore connected to authority. It may be that due to the institutionalisation of the Spanish groups, I felt that group members as well as the librarians, showed a rather accommodating attitude towards my project. This attitude could also be interpreted as a means of demonstrating some kind of

²¹ Other groups such as *El Pozo* reading group from Madrid and some of the Guadalajara and Azuqueca shared similar origins to those in Málaga. For the Madrid and Guadalajara area groups, I do not have such detailed testimony of their trajectories as literacy groups which moved to later form reading groups. Nonetheless, the testimony of *El Palo's* equality officer could be taken as representative of what was occurring in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Spain, under Felipe González's socialist government.

admiration towards my work, which in turn, signified an academic recognition of what they were doing, of their reading choices and practices, and which ultimately could be having an empowering effect for them²².

Furthermore, and since Spanish groups were used to different group dynamics, that is, they were used to the presence of the librarian guiding the discussion, they also expected me to fulfil a similar role. For this reason I did not feel restrained as to when to intervene in the groups' discussions and did not wait until the end of the session to pose the questions to the readers. On many occasions, I would ask for some clarification straightaway. Overall, and despite the specificity of both research contexts, what my fieldwork experience with British and Spanish groups confirmed once more was the suitability of my method in accessing readers' mechanisms of interpretation when making sense of Allende's novels.

The Use of Questionnaires as Method

At the beginning of the research process, I designed a pilot questionnaire for each individual who would take part in the research. Several readings on ethnographic and qualitative methods (Foote, 1984; Fetterman, 1989; Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; LeCompte and Schensul, 1999; Riley, 1990) illustrated how questionnaires were mostly used in qualitative research projects and appeared to be a good way of substantiating initial speculations the researcher had, and of collecting certain information about participants.

²² Similarly were the consequences of Radway's presence in the community of Smithton where 'her temporary presence [in Smithton] and the lengthy conversations she had with the women, had an empowering effect on them, in the way they were given the rare opportunity to come to a collective understanding and validation of their own reading experiences' (Ang, 1996:101).

However, after having distributed a pilot questionnaire among a few reading group members, I realised it was not giving me the information I thought it would.

Firstly, the idea of a questionnaire for each individual in the group did not work because most members failed to return it to me. One of many reasons for this may have been that although their identity was concealed, they may have felt anxious about giving the “right” answer to the open-ended questions. Second, the questionnaires returned did not offer me the sort of insights that could be further explored. Nonetheless, and despite these drawbacks, I did not completely disregard the use of questionnaires as a possible method, so I looked for a suitable alternative. What did I really want to know with a questionnaire? Perhaps I did not want to find out more about readers’ responses to Allende – which I was already obtaining through their group discussions - but more about the composition of the groups themselves and their reading practices. This would help me consider to which extent other contextual factors could have an effect upon shaping readers’ responses to Allende.

I drew on Jenny Hartley’s (2002) group questionnaire which she used during her own research with 350 reading groups in the UK.²³ Following Hartley’s model I had the guarantee that if it had produced results for her own project, I had a better chance of succeeding when using it for my own. This time I received most of the questionnaires completed²⁴ but more importantly, this group questionnaire, as I had envisaged, became a way of keeping essential information and details about each group. There were some key questions which

²³ See Appendix for both British and Spanish versions of the group questionnaire at the end of this thesis.

²⁴ This includes returns from all the groups that had previously been given individual questionnaires. Of the British and Spanish groups, only one out of the nine and ten groups I respectively contacted failed to return the questionnaire.

enabled me to draw conclusions about gender, class, group dynamics and reading publics when comparing British and Spanish groups as shall be seen in the following section.

British and Spanish Reading Groups' Specificity Based on Responses Given by the Group Questionnaires

This section intends to draw a comparison between British and Spanish groups and aims at inferring groups' specificity. To achieve this, British and Spanish groups will be compared against their overall respective group sample within this project, as well as against the broader context of Jenny Hartley's 2002 survey²⁵ among 350 UK reading groups and Blanca Calvo's 2003 survey among 30 public libraries in Spain²⁶.

Most groups of readers who participated in this research belonged to well-established reading groups, that is, groups which had been meeting for at least a minimum of five years to the date of the fieldwork in 2001 or 2002.

In the British context, two groups out of nine had been meeting for more than 20 years, two between 15 and 20 years, three between 5 and 10 years and only two less than 2 years. The two British groups which had a relatively short history, less than two years, were those set up by bookshops or local libraries:

²⁵ To date Hartley's survey is the most comprehensive and detailed available in the British context.

²⁶ Blanca Calvo ran a small qualitative survey at the end of February 2003 – eight questions - via email directed to all Spanish 'Bibliotecas Públicas' [Public Libraries]. Blanca kindly handed over to me all the information she had received at the time. She had initially conducted this survey because she had been invited to talk at a national level about reading groups [Clubes de Lectura] in the 'Seminario hispano-británico' organised by the Ministry of Education on the 25th and 26th of March 2003 in Madrid. For more information about the questions Blanca asked, see appendix at the end of the thesis. This survey is not as systematic or as big – in size - as Hartley's in the British context but at the time of writing this thesis, this was the only available information on other existing Spanish reading groups outside this research.

Waterstone's reading group in Nottingham (Nottingham Reading Group 1) and Lincoln Library.

In the Spanish context, a similar pattern emerged. Five groups had been meeting between 10 and 15 years, four more between 5 and 10 years and only one, less than 1 year. However, and contrary to the British context, the long history of some of the Spanish groups was a direct result of their origins as library run groups, unlike in the British context²⁷.

Hartley's survey shows that out of the 350 groups she contacted²⁸, 38% of the groups had been running less than two years, and only 21% had been meeting for more than 10 years²⁹. In this respect, it appears that the British groups taking part in this research had certainly a longer history than the majority of groups of Hartley's survey.

In the Spanish context, of the thirty libraries that responded to Blanca Calvo, five started running reading groups in 1998 and another five in 2002. Only one started in 1987 but most were formed in the late 90s and early 2000/2001, similarly to those which took part in this project. This could also be an indication of the period when the Spanish public libraries' initiatives to form reading groups were at their peak. However, it does not mean that reading groups are not being formed all the time given that in both countries there were

²⁷ These figures included the two Málaga groups which had been initially created as part of a larger project which originated in the 'centros culturales' [similar to Community Centers], with the economic aid of the 'Junta de Andalucía' [Andalusian regional government], and 'Instituto de la Mujer' [Women's Institute]. These 'centros culturales' had a small library where the reading group sessions were coordinated by a librarian.

²⁸ Hartley (2002) originally conducted her survey among 350 UK reading groups but she explains that the sample sizes vary –as her tables show - between the different questions depending on the number of groups answering all the questions in the questionnaire. A similar pattern emerges in Calvo's survey when not all the 30 groups are consistent in answering all the questions in the survey.

²⁹ Hartley's survey breaks down overall results further by specifying group location (rural, urban, suburban) and sometimes age group. For the purpose of this project and to simplify figures and percentages, I will only consider the overall results in Hartley's survey unless specified.

groups with a history of less than two years. Furthermore, the fact that most of the groups I contacted in Spain –seven out of the ten- included different public libraries within the Guadalajara area –Biblioteca de Guadalajara, Biblioteca de Azuqueca and Biblioteca de Fontanar - where the reading group project originated in Spain, perhaps, explains their longer tradition compared to the most recent ones of the Málaga and Madrid groups.

The gender breakdown in the British and Spanish reading groups in this research shows that groups are predominantly made out of women in both countries³⁰. Out of the nine British reading groups, one was men only, three were mixed and the remaining five were women only.

In the Spanish context, only one group was mixed and the other nine groups, women only. In the mixed groups, both in Britain and Spain, the proportion of women to men was five to one.

In Hartley's survey she found that out of a sample of 347 groups, 69% were women only, 4% were men only and 27% mixed. Compared to the results of the 30 Spanish libraries, twelve groups were mixed with a high percentage of women members; only two groups were women only and one group men only.

These figures show that the groups I have been working with in Britain and Spain conform to the general pattern and given that in both countries women membership overall exceeds men membership in mixed groups, it could be claimed that reading in groups is still predominantly a women's activity.

Besides all this, a series of characteristics such as members' relationships, place of meeting, group numbers, frequency of meetings, authors/titles chosen,

³⁰ Jenny Hartley (2002) devotes part of chapter two *Who Belongs to Reading Groups?* to list the most common reasons she found for men not joining among the 350 UK reading groups she contacted.

members' educational background and social status appear to be connected to the groups' origins in both Britain and Spain.

Most of the British groups in this research – except for the two library run groups -were formed by a group of friends or neighbours. According to the group questionnaires, most members not only shared friendship but also a common interest in reading, especially those titles/authors 'you wouldn't choose yourself' and an eagerness to share one's reading thoughts with others as a means of social interaction.

Hartley does not offer quantitative results regarding the origin of the 350 groups but from her category 'Place of Meeting' it is easy to extrapolate who and how groups were originally formed. Her survey shows that among 341 groups, 80% of these meet in homes, 6% meet in libraries and 14% in other public spaces, such as pubs, bars, cafés, pizza restaurants and health and fitness centres. Since the highest percentage corresponds to the category 'home' this can be read symptomatically as the result of a friendship and neighbourhood proximity as main reasons for people to start and stay part of a reading group.

Since all reading groups I contacted in Spain originated out of a public institution, being the initiative of the librarian or equality officer who helped to set up and later co-ordinate the group, this initial friendship did not exist among members in the Spanish context but may have developed later. As for any other reading groups formed in Spain, these were also the initiative of a public library³¹.

³¹ Blanca Calvo's article 'Primer encuentro de clubes de lectura' (2000), published in the Spanish Journal *Bibliotecas Públicas*, largely supports this claim about reading groups in Spain mainly being created by public libraries.

How groups were initially set up also has an impact on numbers and frequency of their meetings. In this respect, British and Spanish reading groups differ from each other considerably.

In Britain, most of the reading groups I contacted were made of an average of 10 members whereas most Spanish groups' average membership was 20. This contrast could be explained in connection with the friendship and place of meeting elements. If in the British context it is a group of friends who organise a rota system to meet at each other's homes, it is unlikely that a reasonable living room area would accommodate more than 10 people. Conversely, being able to use library common rooms as venues offers the possibility of holding larger numbers.

Hartley's (2002) survey among 333 groups offers similar results. The most common is to find groups between 6 and 10 people. These represent 57% of the total, whereas only 7% represents groups of 16 people or more.

For the Spanish groups, a constant pattern emerges among the groups represented in the thirty libraries in Blanca Calvo's survey³². Out of the 30 libraries, 16 had a minimum of 20 members in all the groups running, 11 libraries did not mention groups' numbers and only 3 had less than 20 members. Within these few exceptions, membership in Spanish reading groups is rather large compared to the British groups.

Equally, the fact that the average Spanish group met once a week – except for one of the groups which met once a month³³ – stresses their strong

³² Although Calvo did not specifically ask for membership numbers, some of the libraries would volunteer this 'extra' piece of information when asked how many reading groups were currently running in the same library.

³³ The sessions I attended in Spain were timed with precision by librarians so I could listen to the discussion of the entire book rather than the designated amount of pages that get discussed weekly.

educational base compared to British groups who usually met every four to six weeks. This pattern fits in the wider picture of Hartley's survey with 69% of groups meeting once a month and 7 groups out of 15 meeting once a week according to Calvo's findings.

It is also interesting to note the higher percentage of entire British groups having gone through higher education³⁴, but more importantly, and possibly linked to their educational status was the self-identity British groups sought to project.

Among the various cues which contributed to create a particular readers' self-identity, I found revealing the type of homes they lived in, as well as those signs which permeated through the actual group meetings and reading choices. Some of the properties I visited were detached family homes, some located in areas of the city which enjoyed a "good" reputation, such as West Bridgford in Nottingham. Others were rather old properties, for example 'Morton Hall' in Southwell. From the outside, the bigger and older properties were surrounded by well-looked after mature gardens. In the inside, some preserved original features; lounges were large exhibiting solid pieces of furniture; sometimes, classical music would play in the background, and a collection of interior design magazines, - such as *Home and Antiques* - neatly stacked on coffee tables would also form part of the décor. All these exterior signs complemented their 'middle-class'³⁵ self-identity - or 'petite bourgeoisie' in Bourdieu's (1984) terms - which

³⁴ Out of the British nine groups, 100% of the members in five groups had been in higher education. In addition to this, no less than 50% was given as the lowest percentage for the four remaining groups.

³⁵ As already noted in the Introduction, Stuart Hall's article 'Notes on Deconstructing "The Popular"' argues that there is no clear cut 'one-to-one relationship between a class and a particular form or practice. The terms "class" and "popular" are deeply related but are not absolutely interchangeable' (Hall, 1981:238). In this respect, any class references that appear in this thesis set out from a non-essentialising concept of class especially since according to John Frow (1995) in *Cultural Studies and Cultural Value* 'The categories of high and low culture,

was reinforced by the confidence, pride and seriousness which characterised their groups' discussions.

Groups' confidence came across through the ways in which the meetings were conducted. In contrast to the Spanish groups, there was no formal moderator or readers' guides to steer the discussion. Sometimes, the person who had chosen the book might start the session or give a brief introduction about the author. Some groups would organise their sessions in such a way that each member would speak for a couple of minutes so a general discussion could follow. Also, other groups mentioned that the person with the strongest feelings about the book would begin, but in any case, what seemed to transpire was members' independence and self-assurance to sustain a two and a half hour book discussion by themselves.

Hartley's (2002) research in the UK offered similar insights in this respect. Participation understood 'as every member having a chance to share his views with the rest seemed to be the guiding principle in most' (*ibid*, 85). However, unlike the small sample of British groups in this research, Hartley found that most groups had a presenter or leader for the session. It is also worth noting in Hartley's study that some groups which appeared quite casual – like most British groups in this research - had their own hard rules, such as everybody must have read the book if they wanted to join the meeting or a written critique should be sent if somebody missed a session (*ibid*, 85-88). This means that possibly the British groups taking part in this research were also governed by

which are structured as a polar opposition, presuppose a more or less direct correlation between culture and class. But the relations of domination and subordination [...] have been modified in the twentieth century by the formation of mass audiences which are inclusive rather than exclusive' (1995:24).

certain rules although not made explicit. Having rules, perhaps, had to do with how they perceived their reading group activity as worthy and serious given that:

the petite bourgeoisie ties him or herself up in knots with double bluffs designed to ape bourgeois “ease” while at the same time retaining the typically petit-bourgeois belief that culture – being acquired with difficulty – is much too important to be treated in a casual manner (Labanyi, 2002:20).

British groups’ pride was suggested by the fact that three out of nine groups stated that none of their books ‘had gone badly’ and those groups who mentioned books that resulted in ‘bad’ sessions usually blamed books ‘unoriginality’ (Bingham Reading Group), ‘poor style of writing and the superficiality of characters’ (Southwell Reading Group and Birmingham Reading Group 2), ‘the book’s little depth’ (Lincoln Library Group) but rarely their own limitations as readers, except for one occasion where the questionnaire read: ‘Everybody hated it [*When we were Orphans*]. Maybe we didn’t understand it’ (Nottingham Reading Group 2). Also, when asked whether their discussion tended to digress, most groups clearly stated that their conversations ‘centred on the text’ (Leicester Reading Group) but if they deviated groups would mention mostly issues that would be regarded as ‘serious’ such as ‘ethics issues raised by the book, race, philosophy’ (Nottingham Reading Group 2), ‘health, other books, social news, education, theatre’ (Southwell Reading Group), ‘current affairs, politics, the threat of war, the world of education’ (Leicester Reading Group).

Furthermore, since most British readers appeared to have acquired their ‘cultural capital’³⁶ through education, their relationship with culture seemed also

³⁶Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has used the term *cultural capital* to describe how a person’s class and social status are reflected in bodies of acquired knowledge. Cultural capital can come from schools, but most often it is a result of being brought up in a family or social group that already possesses it and therefore teaches and values it. Aesthetics, appreciation of classical music, history or philosophy, and other forms of high art are examples of valued knowledges’ (Brown, 1994:114).

marked by their anxiety about demonstrating that they possessed legitimate cultural competence. This transpired through their “classics” and “middlebrow” choice of authors/titles. Fewer authors/titles were “classics”³⁷ among their choices, whereas the vast majority corresponded to contemporary award-winning bestsellers by British authors. Perhaps, one of the main reasons for choosing award-winning titles originated in readers’ search for legitimation since in most cases, this legitimation was challenged by the fact that those same titles were regarded as bestsellers and therefore moving away from what would be considered “high” culture.

Once again, the best means to engage with groups’ reading choices is by examining the following table:

Table 7: Common choice of authors/titles across British groups

BRITISH GROUPS	AUTHOR	TITLE READ
Leicester Reading Group	Ian McEwan Michael Ondaatje Charles Frazier Barbara Kingsolver Kazuo Ishiguro Sebastian Faulks J.M. Coetzee Kate Atkinson Carol Shields	<i>Black Dogs</i> <i>In the Skin of a Lion</i> <i>Cold Mountain</i> <i>The Poisonwood Bible</i> <i>When we were Orphans</i> <i>Charlotte Gray</i> <i>Life and Times of Michael K</i> <i>Behind the Scenes at the Museum</i> <i>The Stone Diaries.</i>
Nottingham Reading Group 1	Barbara Kingsolver Kazuo Ishiguro Michael Ondaatje J.M. Coetzee Kate Atkinson E. Annie Proulx	<i>Prodigal Summer</i> <i>When we were Orphans</i> <i>Anil’s Ghost</i> <i>Disgrace</i> <i>Behind the Scenes at the Museum</i> <i>The Shipping News</i>
Nottingham Reading Group 2	Kazuo Ishiguro Sebastian Faulks	<i>When we were Orphans</i> <i>Charlotte Gray</i>
Nottingham Library*		
Birmingham Reading Group 1	Kate Atkinson Carol Shields	<i>Behind the Scenes at the Museum</i> <i>Happenstance</i>
Birmingham Reading Group 2	Charles Frazier	<i>Cold Mountain</i>

³⁷ Some groups “classics” would include Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*; James Joyce’s *Dubliners*; Shelley’s *Frankenstein*; Huxley’s *Brave New World* but none of these were repeatedly mentioned across all of the British groups.

	Sebastian Faulks Linda Grant Carol Shields	<i>Fatal Englishman</i> <i>When I lived in Modern Times</i> <i>Larry's Party</i>
Bingham Reading Group	Barbara Kingsolver	<i>The Poisonwood Bible</i>
Southwell Reading Group	Barbara Kingsolver Ian McEwan Linda Grant	<i>The Poisonwood Bible</i> <i>Atonement</i> <i>When I lived in Modern Times</i>
Lincoln Library	Kate Atkinson Carol Shields E. Annie Proulx	<i>Behind the Scenes at the Museum</i> <i>Larry's Party</i> <i>The Shipping News</i>

* There are no titles for Nottingham Library group since the group questionnaire was never returned.

If this overall picture is compared with Hartley's (2002) survey, a similar pattern seems to emerge regarding most members' educational background. Out of 332 groups, in 88% of the groups, more than half of their members possessed higher education qualifications, leading Hartley to conclude that 'having had some kind of higher education [...] is the biggest single factor which reading groups have in common' (*ibid*, 34). On the other hand, Hartley finds it surprising to discover that 36% of the groups were located in rural communities and tried to establish any correlation between location and age without reaching any satisfactory conclusions. More important is to note that the authors' choices in this project largely corresponded to those listed in some of the group lists mentioned by Hartley.

Moving to the Spanish context, a completely different picture emerged. To begin with, the highest percentage for members in higher education was 50% and this figure corresponded to only one group out of the ten. In addition, two groups stated that 0% of their members had been in higher education. A total of 20% per group was the average figure for members in higher education in the Spanish groups. Nonetheless, these results are consistent with the origins and ethos of the Spanish reading groups, which are in tune with some groups' listed

responses to what made them join: ‘Gusto por la lectura e inquietudes por saber’ (Biblioteca de Fontanar) (‘Love for reading and a thirst for knowledge’) ‘Nos anima a leer con asiduidad y continuidad’ (Biblioteca de Guadalajara 2) (‘It [belonging to a reading group] encourages us to read assiduously and continuously’) ‘Obligarte a leer cada semana y ansia de saber’ (Biblioteca de Guadalajara 1) (‘An obligation to read every week and thirst for knowledge’).

Despite the already discussed differences between British and Spanish groups regarding their origins and reasons for joining the groups, other factors within their group dynamics also contributed to create a rather different image of that produced in the British context. Spanish sessions compared to British, were led by a librarian-moderator³⁸ as has already been mentioned. The librarian-moderator role mainly consisted of prompting those members who had not spoken and asking their opinions directly. In some other instances, he/she would make a point of addressing certain issues that may have been overlooked and which in turn would instigate different points of view. As with the British groups, there was also room for digressing despite the presence of the librarian-moderator but whereas with the British groups there was a certain reluctance to admit that discussions tended to move away from the text, in the Spanish context all groups admitted without reservations that there was always room for digression where personal as well as non-personal issues were discussed: ‘Se divaga bastante. Surgen temas de todo tipo a partir del comentario del libro, de actualidad, personales’ (Biblioteca de Fontanar) (‘A whole range of issues comes up when we comment on the book, current affairs, personal issues’); ‘Ocurre de todo, hay días que divagamos llevando el tema del libro a vivencias personales y

³⁸ According to Calvo’s survey, people other than librarians acted as moderators. Among those Calvo found journalists, university lecturers, retired secondary school teachers, humanities graduates, group members and writers.

a temas relacionados con el entorno que nos rodea y situaciones de la vida' (Biblioteca de Guadalajara 2) ('Anything can happen, there are days when we digress carrying the theme of the book into personal experiences and issues to do with what's going on around us and life situations'); 'Cuando se divaga mucho procuro retomar el comentario de la lectura, pero también es importante hablar de temas que nos preocupan, el amor, la pareja, los hijos, la política, etc' (Biblioteca de Guadalajara) ('When we digress a lot, I [librarian] try to go back to the reading but it is also important to talk about issues that interest us such as love, partners, children, politics etc'). It is interesting to note how in this last comment, although the librarian-moderator finds that her role is to keep the discussions within the book parameters, she still recognises the importance of offering some space for readers to engage with other non-specific book related issues, as some kind of therapy, as reflected in some of the groups' responses to what members most value and enjoy about the reading group: 'Hemos aprendido como ante una misma situación, se pueden tener distintos sentimientos y todos ser admisibles' (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2) ('We have learnt that facing the same situation, we can have different feelings and all be valid'); 'Aprender a oír distintas opiniones y a respetarlas' (Biblioteca de Guadajara) ('To learn to listen to different opinions and respect them'); 'Compartir vivencias de la propia vida' (Biblioteca de Guadajara 2) ('To share experiences from your own life'); 'Del enriquecimiento que suponen los distintos puntos de vista' (Biblioteca de Fontanar) ('How enriching different points of view can be'). In this respect, the act of reading and discussing appears to have an empowering function for group members, especially for some of the women who, lacking confidence due to their

educational background, may have found in the reading groups a space to speak up freely.

What is really outstanding is that although some of the Spanish readers may not possess the ‘cultural capital’ of their British counterparts or the freedom to choose their readings, they seem to be nevertheless cultivating a “highbrow” taste³⁹ given the large number of “classics” and/or “canonical” authors who form part of their reading choices. Among the “classics” some groups listed Miguel de Unamuno’s *Niebla*, Miguel Delibes’s *El hereje*, Leopoldo Alas Clarín’s *La Regenta*, Camilo José Cela’s *La colmena*, Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, Benito Pérez Galdós’ *Tristana*, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Crimen y castigo*. Furthermore, and unlike with the British groups where books read by more than one group could be all easily labelled as “middlebrow”, in the Spanish context, there was a complete mix of “canonical”/ “highbrow” and “popular”/ “middlebrow” by including authors such as Mario Vargas Llosa, Antonio Skármeta, Mario Benedetti, Gabriel García Márquez, José Saramago or Antonio Tabucchi alongside Isabel Allende, Eduardo Mendoza, Lorenzo Silva, Jesús Marchamalo, Josefina Aldecoa, Elvira Lindo, Almudena Grandes or Rosa Montero among others.

Unlike in the British groups, some of the “popular” choices of authors/titles are not necessarily prize winners although most of them have enjoyed great success in terms of sales figures. Rosa Montero is a good example

³⁹ Bourdieu’s concept of taste is deeply connected with what he describes as ‘distinction’. ‘Distinction’ is understood as a ‘set of acquired tastes associated with the upper classes but which has become more generally naturalised as good and noble’ (Webb et al., 2002: xi). According to Bourdieu the appreciation of art, or a taste for art is something learned rather than inherent. In his seminal work *Distinction* (1984) Bourdieu concluded that because of their social extraction and the education such status provided, the middle-classes possessed adequate conceptual skills that would enable them to approach cultural products with confidence. Contrary to this, the working- classes lacking the skills and confidence of the middle-classes, would as a result possess a kind of taste that would be not regarded as marker of *distinction* or *prestige* such as the taste for classical music (Webb et al., 2002: 153).

since she has only received a prize for *La Hija del caníbal* although most of her titles are usually publishing hits.

Despite this blend of “canonical” and “popular” authors, the fact that there is a strong presence of what would be considered “highbrow” texts, suggests that one of the main objectives of the Spanish groups is still connected to their educational project, to instruct readers in what constitutes “good” or “bad” taste, or in other words, ‘to impose a recognition of the distinction between “good” and “vulgar” taste, between legitimate and illegitimate styles’ (Frow,1995: 29). As with the British groups, the best approach to engage with groups’ reading choices is by examining the following table:

Table 8: Common choice of authors/titles across Spanish groups⁴⁰

SPANISH GROUPS	AUTHOR	TITLE READ
Campanillas Reading Group	Isabel Allende	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i> <i>Paula</i> <i>Retrato en sepia</i>
	Frank McCourt	<i>Las cenizas de Ángela</i>
El Palo Reading Group *	Isabel Allende	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i>
El Pozo Reading Group **	Isabel Allende	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i> <i>Cuentos de Eva Luna</i>
Biblioteca de Guadalajara 1	Isabel Allende	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i> <i>Paula</i>
	Antonio Skármeta	<i>El cartero de Neruda</i>
	Gabriel García Márquez	<i>El amor en los tiempos del cólera</i>
	Mario Vargas Llosa	<i>La tía Julia y el escribidor</i>
	Mario Benedetti	<i>Primavera con una esquina rota</i>
	José Saramago	<i>Ensayo sobre la ceguera</i>
	Almudena Grandes	<i>Malena es un nombre de tango</i>
	Elvira Lindo	<i>Pobre Manolito</i>
	Josefina Aldecoa	<i>Historia de una maestra</i>
	Rosa Montero	<i>Historias de mujeres</i> <i>La hija del caníbal</i> <i>Pasiones</i>
Eduardo Mendoza	<i>El misterio de la cripta embrujada</i>	
Antonio Tabucchi	<i>Sostiene Pereira</i>	
José A. Mañas	<i>Historias del Kronen</i>	

⁴⁰ Unlike in the British context, any Allende titles read by the Spanish groups are included in the table above since they had been chosen and read independently from these groups’ participation in this research.

	Miguel A. Fernández Pacheco Lorenzo Silva Jesús Marchamalo	<i>Siete historias para la infanta Margarita</i> <i>Los zapatos de Murano</i> <i>La niebla y la doncella</i> <i>La tienda de palabras</i>
Biblioteca de Guadalajara 2	Isabel Allende José Saramago Almudena Grandes Elvira Lindo Eduardo Mendoza Antonio Tabucchi Lorenzo Silva	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i> <i>Ensayo sobre la ceguera</i> <i>Los aires difíciles</i> <i>Algo más inesperado que la muerte</i> <i>Sin noticias de Gurb</i> <i>Requiem</i> <i>La niebla y la doncella</i>
Biblioteca de Azuqueca 1	Isabel Allende Antonio Skármeta Mario Vargas Llosa José Saramago Rosa Montero Dulce Chacón	<i>La hija de la fortuna</i> <i>Retrato en sepia</i> <i>La boda del poeta</i> <i>La fiesta del chivo</i> <i>Ensayo sobre la ceguera</i> <i>Pasiones</i> <i>La voz dormida</i>
Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2	Isabel Allende Antonio Skármeta Frank McCourt Almudena Grandes Josefina Aldecoa Rosa Montero Dulce Chacón Jesús Marchamalo	<i>La hija de la fortuna</i> <i>Retrato en sepia</i> <i>La boda del poeta</i> <i>Las cenizas de Ángela</i> <i>Los aires difíciles</i> <i>Historia de una maestra</i> <i>Pasiones</i> <i>La voz dormida</i> <i>La tienda de palabras</i>
Biblioteca de Azuqueca 3	Isabel Allende Mario Benedetti	<i>Retrato en Sepia</i> <i>Primavera con una esquina rota</i>
Biblioteca de Fontanar	Isabel Allende Josefina Aldecoa Miguel A. Fernández Pacheco Nacho Abad	<i>La casa de los espíritus</i> <i>Historia de una maestra</i> <i>Siete historias para la infanta Margarita</i> <i>Los zapatos de Murano</i> <i>Diario de una becaria</i>
Biblioteca de Marchamalo	Isabel Allende Frank McCourt Nacho Abad	<i>Paula</i> <i>Las cenizas de Ángela</i> <i>Diario de una becaria</i>

* As in the British context, El Palo reading group was the only group which did not return the questionnaire. This is why there is only the Allende entry for its corresponding slot.

** El Pozo reading group has only got two Isabel Allende's entries. This is due to the group's recent beginnings when I first contacted them. As already mentioned earlier on in this chapter, this group's first reading choice was *Cuentos de Eva Luna*. They agreed that they would read *La casa de los espíritus* so it could be discussed during my visit.

It is not possible though to offer generalizations only coming from the reading groups' sample I worked with, since Calvo's survey did not include any comments on any of the issues just discussed. Thus, the experience of the Spanish sample is not intended to be transferable to other groups outside this

research but it highlights once more the specificity of the Spanish groups compared to the British.

On the whole, the self-identity projected by the Spanish reading groups is, perhaps, characterised by aspiration and self-improvement. All this is not say that all members in the Spanish groups belonged to what in the British context would be understood as the ‘working- class’. But even if they did, their class origins do not seem to be an obstacle to assimilate the values and practices which would be considered ‘middle-class’.

As a final remark I would like to emphasize that rather than presenting British and Spanish readers as “typical” within a wider pool of readers in Britain and Spain or cross-culturally by comparing British and Spanish groups, this section has been designed to highlight the specificity of the reading groups based on some of the patterns emerging out of the group questionnaires and which may impinge on the responses given by readers as shall be seen in the following chapters.

Keeping a Record of Reading Groups’ Discussions

I was able to tape record every session in Britain and Spain, following consultation and approval from the groups. Recordings have allowed me to transcribe most of what was said in the group discussions. Although it was an extremely time consuming activity, not only did it facilitate the processes of analysis of the information gathered in the field - as shall be seen in more detail in the following chapters – but it also gave me the opportunity to represent readers’ voices more accurately. As far as I could, I would transcribe the exact

words used by the readers and rather leave gaps whenever I could not make sense of what was said due to either the poor quality or background noise of the recording. Nonetheless, and despite my efforts to be as accurate as possible with my transcriptions, I also identify with Dorothy Hobson's reflections upon the recreation of her respondents' views when she was conducting her research on *Crossroads*:

Extracts from transcripts of interviews can appear very bland and unexciting. To *listen* [her emphasis] to tapes is an entirely different experience from *reading* [her emphasis] short extracts which lose, above all, the intonation and laughter of the speakers. The enthusiasm which some of the viewers have shown in their own recounting of storylines of the programme and incidents involved in the programme can only be realized by the reader if my words are able to recreate the atmosphere of the times when I watched the programme with them (Hobson, 2000:114).

The same enthusiasm that for example Hobson's viewers expressed in some of their comments about *Crossroads* is also true of some of the readers in this research, but as Hobson claims it seems impossible to fully represent this enthusiasm, voice inflections, hesitation or laughter.

Nonetheless, and given the limitations on the recreation of readers' comments, I still find it necessary to be explicit about the selection of my material. Initially I started reading Allende's readers trying to establish patterns and common themes which would either emerge in the British groups only, the Spanish groups only, or both. More importantly, these themes and patterns had to be informed by the original question of this research, 'Why is Isabel Allende such a "popular" writer in two different cultural contexts such as Britain and Spain?' Or slightly rephrased and with a clearer focus 'What elements/themes have British and Spanish readers recurrently identified in Allende's texts that make the whole experience of reading enjoyable - or the opposite - and as a

result help us understand her popularity?' Thus, given that these were the parameters in which I was situating readers' comments, I carefully engaged and read several times the British and Spanish readers' transcriptions to identify the recurrent elements/themes emerging out of readers' comments. During this process, the more familiar the materials felt, the more patterns and connections surfaced among groups in each country as well as across groups in Britain and Spain.

Confident about the similarities and differences, which I had identified, the editing process began since it would have been impossible, irrelevant and impractical to envisage an all-inclusive account of all readers' comments from both countries. In this sense, the editing process followed an internal logic. It had been conceived as a means to highlight and select those readers' comments that were relevant in the sense that would exemplify, support or interrogate the claims of the original research question.

Another issue that needed resolving was the ways in which I was going to present readers' comments for the potential reader of this thesis. I had no difficulty in recognising British readers' voices on the tape so I could easily code their comments by identifying each reader with one of the alphabet letters. However, this system was not adequate for the Spanish groups since most groups had between 20 and 25 participants. For this reason, I decided not to use any coding system to identify individual readers in the Spanish context since within this project, no conclusions were intended to be drawn upon any specific reader. It was far more important to be able to identify the different groups and code them accordingly. For this purpose, I decided to use the groups' origin, that is

the city or town where the group session took place followed by the title of the Allende book they read as a group.

I should clarify, though, that British groups read translated versions of the originals in Spanish. To acknowledge this difference I refer to Allende's titles in either English or Spanish to distinguish between English and Spanish versions of the same title. Also I should note that any translations into English from Spanish readers' comments or any other secondary sources in Spanish are my own unless stated otherwise.

Conclusion

This chapter's discussions have overall revealed that the participant observant and participant discussant approaches taken to reading groups in Britain and Spain respectively has been successfully used in obtaining the necessary materials to develop the project and answer the main research question on Allende's popularity.

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed how initial methodological issues were finally resolved satisfactorily. These included: the validity of reading groups as the main methodological tool, the influence brought by my own subjectivity, the relationship established between the field and me in both research contexts, and the relevance of group questionnaires.

In addition, this chapter has also offered a detailed representation to acknowledge the specificity of the different groups taking part in this research project. The specificity of British and Spanish groups, presented in comparative

terms, revealed the similarities and differences between British and Spanish groups participating in this research as well as in relation to a larger pool of reading groups in Britain and Spain. The purpose of acknowledging the groups' specificity ultimately served to foreground the analysis of the following chapters in this thesis, where not only the dialogues between text and readers are accounted for, but also how their respective reading contexts impact on their responses to Allende.

Finally, this chapter has discussed the ways in which I kept a record of readers' readings including the processes of transcription, selection, editing and reading of the materials.

Chapter Three

Isabel Allende's Popularity From an 'Extra-Literary' Perspective

Introduction

This chapter examines a selection of discourses surrounding Allende's public representation outside British and Spanish readers' responses to her fiction. By examining such discourses, this chapter aims at understanding Allende's popularity from a production and consumption perspective. In order to achieve this, this chapter principally examines the role that extensive press coverage of Allende in Britain and Spain has played - and is still playing - in creating particular public images and discourses of the author. Throughout this chapter the selection of such discourses has been conceived as illustrative rather than comprehensive and will be organized thematically.

All the press excerpts selected cover approximately from the year 1988 to date and consist of hard as well as electronic versions of newspaper articles. The electronic database used in this search is called *LexisNexis Executive*. It provides access to a world wide range of news sources but specifically for the purpose of this project the search was restricted to 'UK News, newspapers only' and 'European News, Spanish only'. Since within the Spanish search, I could not select the 'newspaper only' category, many of the news matching the search criteria, 'Isabel Allende and writer' came back in the form of wire services

provided by *Efe News Services*. Other electronic sources such as Allende's official home page will also be used, as well as the Spanish literary magazine *Qué leer*.

Constructing Allende's Public Discourses through the British and Spanish Press

a) Allende's Commercialised Production

Celia Correas Zapata (1998) titled one of the latest chapters of her book interview with Isabel Allende 'Escribiendo para el mundo' ('Writing for the world'). This title choice is indicative of the overall message of the chapter: Isabel Allende is not just being read in Europe, Latin America, and the United States but reaches as far as China, Vietnam and Korea (1998:178). She is read world wide and her astounding sales figures are able to sustain such claims showing that 556,000 copies of *The House of the Spirits*, 351,000 of *Eva Luna* and 316,000 of *Of Love and Shadows* sold in Germany alone between 1981 and 1991⁴¹. It is estimated that her total book sales have exceeded thirty million copies worldwide (Correas Zapata, 1998:179; *Efe News Services*, 2 August 2002) and the British and Spanish press corroborate such success by the several examples which have situated Isabel Allende as an international renowned author:

⁴¹ Griego, Adán; 2004. *Interviews & Articles: The Wandering Spirits of Isabel Allende* [online]. Available from: http://www.isabelallende.com/interviews_articles.htm [Accessed 10 August 2007].

Isabel Allende [...] is top of the best-sellers and has been in the fiction lists with her latest book, *Hija de la Fortuna*, for 44 weeks (*The Guardian*, 31 January 2000).

The novelist Isabel Allende, 59, attracted worldwide attention when her first book, *The House of the Spirits*, became an international bestseller in the early eighties (*The Independent on Sunday*, 23 September 2001).

Sus libros se venden por millones y sus novelas han sido traducidas a más de 30 idiomas (*El País*, 25 September 2004).

Her books sell by the million and her novels have been translated into more than 30 languages.

Thus, in terms of its commercialised production, Allende's popularity is irrefutable but Allende's popularity cannot only be understood as mass production and consumption.

As noted in the introduction, this chapter's emphasis lies in what I named the 'extra-literary' aspects that have contributed to her popularity and does not include any responses offered by readers. Nonetheless, there are several moments throughout this thesis that show that the discourses around her public figure constructed by Isabel Allende and the media in general, have played a significant role in shaping some of the British and Spanish readers' responses to her novels. This influence is particularly felt when analysing readers' responses to *Paula* in chapter six and readers' location of Allende within the Latin American "literary" tradition in chapter eight. In this respect, the influence of the 'extra-literary' should not be underestimated as some of the issues specifically discussed in this chapter return to inform and make sense of some of the readers' responses later on in this thesis.

b) Early Socio-historical Factors Contributing to Allende's Transnational Success

First, it is worth considering a series of socio-historical conditions that may have favoured the production and consumption of *The House of the Spirits* in Spain and which may have transformed Allende's initial "literary" anonymity into a well renowned international bestseller. At the time *The House of the Spirits* was first published in Spain in 1982, many Chileans had already fled from Chile to live in exile (Wright and Oñate, 2004: 57-65). Chile was remembered internationally for the devastating events of 1973 and thousands of Chilean refugees were likely to keep those memories alive while living in their adopted countries like Spain. In 1982 Spain was enjoying its young and inexperienced democracy with a newly elected Socialist government (PSOE Partido Socialista Obrero Español) after an era of more than forty years of authoritarian rule under Franco. This was the reverse of the political situation in Chile at the time, and it may have been a period in which sympathetic feelings directed across the Atlantic were growing; the ideal moment to remind Spanish people that what was happening in Chile had happened not long ago in Spain. *The House of the Spirits* therefore, emerged in a favourable political climate which may have initially helped boost Allende's sales figures.

In addition to this receptive environment towards the Chilean cause, Allende's novel had the opportunity to take-off due to other factors. She had emerged as a *post-boom* writer within the male dominated arena of the Latin American *boom*⁴². *Post boom* writers emerged in the 1970s in Latin America,

⁴² Names such as Gabriel García Márquez, Julio Cortázar and Mario Vargas Llosa belonged to this group of well-renowned authors who had established a world-wide reputation of "highbrow" literature for many other Latin American writers to follow. Other well-known contemporary

following the literary explosion of the 1960s known as the *boom*. Donald L. Shaw (1999) suggests that Antonio Skármeta's first novel, published in 1975, *Soñé que la nieve ardía*, could be taken as the starting point for the *post boom* as well as signifying the return to the testimonial genre. In *Landmarks in Modern Latin American Fiction* Philip Swanson (1990) also offers a good critical insight into the transition from *boom* to *post boom* situating the emergence of the former in the 1940s and 1950s (1990:1). He argues from an aesthetic perspective that this 'new novel [...] can be seen as a reaction against and rejection of the assumptions and forms of traditional realism' (*ibid*). Swanson further claims that the social unease felt by the *boom* writers and caused by 'an erosion of traditional values, generating instability, uncertainty, a sense of social and even metaphysical disorientation' (1990:13-14) equally contributed to the experimenting with new aesthetic forms and whose main objective was to generate new means of exploring Latin American realities. Conversely, *post-boom* writers in dealing with the social turmoil that many Latin American countries were experiencing during the seventies, moved away from the experimentalism and elitism generated by the *boom*, incorporating instead a variety of "popular" elements into their writings such contemporary songs, films and soap operas. These new themes were treated with humour and irony replacing the pessimism and stylistic excesses of the *boom* novels (Shaw 1989, Swanson, 1990; Shaw 1999).

In this respect, Allende's initial success could have been partly stimulated by her association with the *post -boom* as well as by the publication and success of *The House of the Spirits* in Spain, before anywhere else.

women authors such as Rosario Castellanos or Beatriz Guido had been excluded from the *boom* since this was conceived as a 'men' only "literary" movement (Shaw, 1999:260).

From a merely commercial point of view, the Spanish publishing industry held a tradition of publishing Latin American authors. This tradition had initially been marked by two major political events: the collapse of the Spanish Second Republic and the Second World War. Whereas the latter offered the Latin American publishing market an opportunity to expand – given the paralysis European and North American markets suffered during and after the war –, the former reactivated the cultural circles and established economic links with Spanish publishing houses prompted by the arrival of many Spanish intellectuals who had fled Spain for political reasons in 1940 (Shaw, 1999: 17-18).

Among the most influential publishing houses at the time that promoted the Latin American *boom* was 'Seix Barral' (Rama, 1981:66; Saval, 2002:208). Part of 'Seix Barral's' highly effective promotion tactics was the organisation of international "literary" contests, such as the 'Biblioteca Breve' prize which 'extended and popularised the movement [*boom*]' since 'the book awarded with this Prize used to be published simultaneously by fourteen publishing houses all over the world' (Saval, 2002:208)⁴³. What this suggests is that the *boom* generation not only had raised the profile of Latin American letters but also strengthened the links between the European and Latin American "literary" markets before Plaza & Janés published Allende's *The House of the Spirits* for the first time in Spain. More important though, this tradition helped initially unknown authors like Allende to have ready access to the European markets. It

⁴³ This was the case of Mario Vargas Llosa's *La ciudad y los perros* winning the Prize in 1962 and followed by Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Carlos Fuentes or José Donoso (Rama, 1981:66-67; Saval, 2002:208).

may have been more difficult for *post-boom*⁴⁴ writers like her to make the breakthrough if none of the publishing ties between Europe and Latin America had existed in the first place. Thus, when *The House of the Spirits* emerged in 1982, it was enjoying a favourable socio-historical as well as publishing environment in which to flourish. Nonetheless, these factors, although significant, could not fully explain Allende's success. Her popularity is not made up of one but several aspects which not only this chapter but this thesis as a whole aims at identifying from a reader's perspective.

c) Isabel Allende: The Woman Novelist

Laura Freixas (2000) claims in *Literatura y mujeres* that any woman author – and for that matter Allende herself – creates a bigger interest among the media simply because women authors are in a minority within a realm traditionally dominated by men⁴⁵. Freixas further maintains that since our society is free of 'ideological controversies' where artists are not defined any longer by their political ideologies, gender and age become the new labelling mechanisms for the media (Freixas, 2000:37). Women writers become media friendly not only by being a minority outside the 'norm', but also because as women, 'se visten, se pintan, se peinan y posan' (*ibid*) ('they dress up, they put on make up, they do their hair and pose for the camera'). For this reason, references to Allende's

⁴⁴ *Post boom* writers are those who emerged in the 1970s in Latin America, following the literary explosion of the 1960s known as the *boom*. Donald L. Shaw (1999) suggests that Antonio Skármeta's first novel, published in 1975, *Soñé que la nieve ardía*, could be taken as the starting point for the *post boom* as well as signifying the return to the testimonial genre. Philip Swanson's study (1990) also offers a good critical insight into the transition from *boom* to *post boom* in his work *Landmarks in Modern Latin American Fiction*.

⁴⁵ This also seems to be the case of many contemporary Spanish female writers such as Lucía Etxebarria, Espido Freire or Almudena Grandes who appear to "enjoy" a continual attention from the media in Spain.

physical appearance are so prevalent in the construction of her public image. The numerous images that photographic shots offer, also reveals once more the importance granted to the 'corporeal'⁴⁶ (Marshall, 1997) in any press accounts dedicated to any woman or even man contemporary author. In the case of Allende – and talking from personal experience – her press photographs certainly draw your attention for a few seconds since you are attracted to the view of this middle-aged beautiful woman, sometimes with her eyes closed, arms folded in a serene attitude as the following picture shows⁴⁷:



⁴⁶ David P. Marshall (1997) in *Celebrity and Power* suggests that all the emphasis on the 'corporeal' alone acts as a sign of celebrity status since 'images of the bodies of female stars provide some of the raw materials for the construction of norms and normative positions about what the body should represent and what the ideal body should be' (Marshall, 1997:144). In this sense, and as a 'female public personality', Allende 'is implicated in this discourse of representation of the body' (*ibid*, 145).

⁴⁷ This personal reading could sum up many of the Allende's poses I have seen in the British and Spanish press over the years. The above photograph is available online from: http://www.isabelallende.com/press_photos.htm [Accessed 28 November 2007].

In some instances, journalists give their own personal account about Allende's physical appearance. Across the several references I found in the British press, a range of elements could be identified as common in most of them. To begin with, although there is no intention to conceal Allende's age, its disclosure is done tactfully: 'Born in 1942, Allende looks at least a decade younger than her age' (*The Financial Times*, 22 August 1999). Also Allende's mature age either explicitly or implicitly is associated with her beauty, sometimes further implying that she has aged well: 'Most women would kill to look like she does at 58' (*The Sunday Business Post*, 30 January 2000). Several other physical characteristics are highlighted to complement age such as her small stature, her dark hair and eyes and pale skin tone: 'She is 57 and still beautiful, with large brown eyes, an aquiline nose and artfully dishevelled hair' (*The Times*, 8 January 2000); 'She's small with clear, sallow skin. Her eyes sparkle when she speaks [...]' (*The Sunday Business Post*, 30 January 2000) or 'Allende is dark-haired and little herself, a fierce 5ft, 64 year old matriarch [...]' (*The Guardian*, 28 April 2007). References to Allende's hair and eyes underlines her "exotic" looks since her dark features as well as her small stature are being particularly highlighted. More significant is that by placing special emphasis on these features, the British press is reminding the reader about Allende's "difference", an image which Allende also shares and promotes in her own personal accounts about the ways she looks: 'Me siento muy bien aquí [Estados Unidos], pero también extraña, como algo exótico. Para muchos tengo un acento muy fuerte. Para otros no tengo el aspecto de una mujer estadounidense y nunca lo tendré [...]' (*El País Semanal*, 9 December 2001) ('I

feel very good here but also strange, like something exotic. For many people I have a very strong accent. For others I don't resemble the typical American woman and I never will'). Allende is therefore conscious that for the Anglophone world, she hardly fits in with the image of the "average" British – or North American - woman novelist but her "difference" or "exoticism" is what uniquely distinguishes her and British readers need to be reminded of this.

In contrast, the Spanish press focuses on Allende's inner qualities, projecting an image of a "strong" woman rather than emphasising qualities that would possibly strike the Spanish reader as "normal" or ordinary rather than "exotic". For example, she is described as:

Tremendo carácter [...] Tiene que haber sido la fuerza de su carácter la que la ha ayudado a salir de las complicaciones que ha encontrado en su vida (*El País*, 17 Septiembre 2002).

A tremendous character [...] it must have been the strength of her character that has helped her to survive the difficult moments in her life.

Allende es una mujer apegada a la tierra, vital, llena de energía y con un sentido del humor excepcional [...] ; Isabel Allende es una mujer plena, vital, solidaria, con un enorme éxito profesional [...] (*Qué Leer*, Septiembre 2002).

Allende is an earthy woman, vital, full of energy and with an exceptional sense of humour [...] Isabel Allende is a complete woman, vital and supportive, with great professional success [...]

Infatigable luchadora por todas las causas, empezando por la de la mujer, la escritora Isabel Allende, que hoy presentó *El bosque de los pigmeos* [...] (*Efe News Services*, 24 September 2004).

A tireless fighter for all causes, starting with women's causes, the writer Isabel Allende today presented 'El bosque de los pigmeos' [...]

Whereas in the British context, Allende's extra-ordinariness resided in her "exotic" appearance, in the Spanish, she is "different" for her resourcefulness and resilience, perhaps both indispensable qualities for today's modern women wanting to survive in a modern world. This particular role model that the Spanish press presents of Allende, appears to be made up of a woman who fulfils herself at a public level – by enjoying a resounding professional success – but who at the same time has not lost her sense of direction, of what matters in life. Fame and popularity have not stopped Allende from being sensitive towards other people's problems. Above all, she is being praised for being politically committed as the Spanish word "solidaria" conveys. All of these ingredients represent Allende as self-sufficient, as holding the solutions to solve any of the problems that self-help manuals deal with these days.

However, although her inner qualities seem to construct Allende mainly as a "strong" woman, these qualities also need to be downplayed by inserting a certain degree of vulnerability made explicit through the autobiographical references about the loss of her daughter and subsequent depression. This vulnerability could be understood as a counterbalance to the extraordinary personality that she is and that could also alienate those readers who may feel that such a perfect woman does not really exist. Allende's vulnerable image strongly emerges through her public declarations after the unexpected death of her daughter Paula:

When she [Paula] died I felt I had lost everything, that I had lost her physically, emotionally, intellectually and that I had lost her spirit as well. But after a few days, I realised that wasn't true. I had the love I had given her and that was something nobody could take away from me (*The Express*, 24 January 2000).

Fueron tres años de depresión [...] Imagínese [...] Tomaba *Prozac* pero no funcionaba. Claro no era una depresión que se pasara con

pastillas, era tristeza, mucha tristeza lo que yo tenía, y sólo el tiempo te puede llegar a curar de eso (*El Semanal*, 15 September 2002).

I was depressed for three years [...] Just imagine [...] I was taking Prozac but it wasn't working. Obviously, it wasn't a depression which was going to go away with pills, it was sadness, a lot of sadness what I had and only time can heal you of that.

Nevertheless, such personal and intimate accounts do not only insert vulnerability but also highlight Allende's efforts to be perceived as a sincere woman. For this reason, personal accounts will not just concern themes related to the turmoil she experienced during her daughter's illness and death but also will encompass detailed descriptions about her family and love relationships. These kind of themes are quite common in celebrity narratives since according to Frances Bonner 'the stress is overwhelmingly on relationships, consumption and leisure, and work is quite minor. This is part of the establishment of a form of para-social intimacy with the celebrity' (2005: 65). In the case of Allende, these themes are illustrated by her constant references to her marriages: 'She separated from Frías in 1978, divorced him in 1987 and married American lawyer Willie Gordon the following year' (*The Financial Times*, 22 August 1999); love affairs: 'She had left her husband and children to pursue an affair with a musician, only to return three months later' (*The Times*, 8 January 2000); or even family sex scandals: 'She [Allende] suspects that he [her father] may have been bisexual, or perhaps that his social use of drugs got out of hand. "He left the family and we never saw him again"' (*The Times*, 8 January 2000). Furthermore, Allende's perceptions of authenticity and sincerity are equally reinforced by presenting her own writing as an effortless task emanating from a personal experience:

Although her books are not strictly autobiographical "I don't appear in any of them as a character", Allende admits drawing on

her experience to illustrate her works: "I can't remember what is real and what I made up" (*The Independent*, 21 March 1989).

Isabel Allende has already published two memoirs, or three if you count the novel that traced her family history, *The House of the Spirits* (1982). All triggered by personal crises (*The Guardian*, 1 November 2003).

"Al contrario, siempre la tendencia es volver a escribir sobre lo que conozco mejor, sobre lo que no tengo que investigar porque lo siento adentro" (*Efe News Services*, 22 June 2004).

"On the contrary, the tendency is always to write about what I know best, about what I don't have to research because I feel it inside".

Nonetheless, this image of Allende's writing as an effortless task has also been offset by other instances in which precisely an element of effort has been highlighted as necessary part of the writing process, to minimise the negative implications that her effortless approach could bring in terms of "literary" value:

El que la obra esté situada en el siglo XIX ha supuesto para Isabel Allende [...] un verdadero esfuerzo de documentación histórica y trabajar doce horas diarias durante siete meses para lograr sacar a la luz su nueva novela (*Efe News Services*, 9 January 1999).

The fact that the novel is set in the 19th century has meant for Isabel Allende [...] a real effort in terms of historical research and working twelve hours per day for seven months in order to publish her new novel.

Allende says she usually takes about two years to write a novel. When immersed in a project, she works obsessively, putting in 10 or 12 hour days without interruptions (*The Financial Times*, 22 August 1999).

Trabaja de manera metódica, con una disciplina espartana y a un ritmo de ocho a doce horas diarias. Incluye una hora de cierre, como en su época de periodista (*El País*, 5 September 2003).

She [Allende] works in a methodical way, with a Spartan discipline at the rate of eight to twelve hours a day. She sets herself a "closing time" as in her old days as a journalist.

By presenting her writing as an arduous, demanding and well-researched task, Allende is appealing to a section of her readership who may appreciate a

thorough historical contextualisation of events and who may seek to add "value" to their reading (this aspect shall be further discussed in chapter seven). This, nonetheless, also suggests Allende's eagerness to construct an image for her writings characterised by inclusiveness. Any reader can potentially find what s/he is looking for: a family saga or/and contemporary Chilean history in *The House of the Spirits*; adventure or/and nineteenth century history in *Daughter of Fortune*.

Moreover, Allende's effortless ways of writing can also be interpreted as a way to make her audience aware of its potential as writers. As Christine Bridgwood (1986) argues in *Family Romances: the Contemporary Popular Family Saga*, the writing of family sagas – as in the case of Allende's *The House of the Spirits* – reduces the distance between the writer and the reader. By saying this, Bridgwood is implying that when the writing seems to spring from the author's history and experience it makes some women readers consider their own family history as a potential saga. In Bridgwood's own words: 'The ideology of authorship in saga publicity appears to be directing the reader back into the potentialities of her own experience, into her family history as a potential saga, to writing as a 'natural' product of living, achievable through application, strength of will [...]' (1986:171). Thus, in the context of *The House of the Spirits*, Allende creates the illusion that everybody could be a successful writer since the secret of her own success resided in her own personal life experience as well as her own family members. Allende has on several occasions publicly admitted that her grandmother was the prime source of inspiration for the character Clara del Valle in *The House of the Spirits* (*The Times*, 8 January 2000; *Efe News Services*, 5 February 2003, *The Times*, 14 October 2003, *The Guardian*, 18 May

2005; *The Guardian*, 28 April 2007); her second husband William Gordon inspired the main male character Gregory Reeves in her fourth novel *The Infinite Plan* (*The Financial Times*, 22 August 1999) or her grandson Alejandro Frías modelled her adventurous Alexander Cold in her latest trilogy comprising *City of the Beasts*, *Kingdom of the Golden Dragon* and *Forest of the Pygmies* (*El País*, 5 September 2003; *Efe News Services*, 24 September 2004).

In addition to this, the British and Spanish press have even suggested that the young journalist Irene Beltrán in *Of Love and Shadows* was 'obviously modelled on the writer' (*The Financial Times*, 25 October 2003) or that Kate Cold in *City of the Beasts* 'comparte ciertos rasgos de la autora, como haber tenido un flautista en sus vidas [...] ('shares certain features with the author such as having had a flutist in their lives') (*El País*, 5 September 2003). Thus, by sharing with her audience that most of her characters are based on "real" people, - mostly her own family members or herself - Allende is inadvertently shortening the distance between reality and fiction. *Paula* is the prime example of this. In this work, the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction are almost completely blurred given the strong autobiographical components running throughout. As shall be seen, and according to British and Spanish readers' responses in *Paula*, the short distance maintained between the "real" Isabel Allende and the author became central for the novel's success. In the same way Allende's perceptions of sincerity and intimacy, so characteristic of any of her press accounts, seem to successfully work at shortening the distance between the "real" Allende and the author.

Nonetheless, and although what Allende seeks on the one hand is to preserve a sense of authenticity by letting her audience really get to know who

the “real” Allende is, on the other, Allende presents the readers with a kind of reality which is not quite as ordinary as it may appear at first sight. Characters such Clara del Valle or Alexander Cold develop in extraordinary ways reflecting to a certain degree the extraordinary family Allende has. In this sense, Allende aspires to present herself as an ordinary and sincere person as well as opening up a space where her and the world surrounding her is by no means ordinary but quite the opposite: extraordinary.

d) Isabel Allende: The Political Activist

Another powerful set of themes emerging in the representation of Allende within the British and Spanish press is her close relationship with Chilean politics. An aspect which continuously accentuates this relationship is undoubtedly her family name. She is not just any Chilean writer; she is also an ‘Allende’ and this has become an integral part in the construction of her public image through the years. In fact, the connection between the author and Chile’s political turmoil of 1973 was vital not only in securing the initial success of *The House of the Spirits* but also as a powerful anchoring point in nearly all narratives constructed by the media.

In almost every press interview a mention of Salvador Allende (democratically elected Chilean president 1970-73) and General Augusto Pinochet is usually present. Furthermore, in more recent years a revival of the Pinochet /Isabel Allende connection seem to have been inevitable given the unexpected home detention of the old dictator in London (*Efe News Services*, 19 January 2000; *The Guardian*, 31 January 2000; *Efe News Services*, 30 April

2000; *Efe News Services*, 14 December 2000). The following are just several examples which have appeared over the years in the British and Spanish press and which precisely highlight the Allende-Chilean politics connection:

She [Allende] was fond of her uncle, President Salvador Allende Gossens, who died in the bitter army coup of 1973 in mysterious circumstances [...] (*The Independent*, 3 February 1991)

Al tocar el tema de su familia, Isabel Allende aclaró que su parentesco con el fallecido presidente Salvador Allende (1970-1973) proviene de que el gobernante era primo hermano de su padre, Tomás Allende, que abandonó a su madre cuando ella tenía tres años (*Efe News Services*, 11 December 1998).

When talking about her family, Isabel Allende made clear that her relationship with the deceased president Salvador Allende (1970-1973) derives from the fact that he was her father's cousin, Tomás Allende, who abandoned her mother when she was three.

She was brought up in Chile. Her second cousin and godfather was the country's president, Salvador Allende, who died during the Augusto Pinochet coup in 1973 (*The Independent on Sunday*, 23 September 2001).

At first glance what is significant about the above press accounts is how each of them offers a different version of the family kinship existing between Salvador Allende and the author. The belief which possibly most readers share is that Isabel was Salvador Allende's niece when in reality the deceased president was her father's cousin and not her uncle⁴⁸. This family myth-making has therefore been endorsed and unchallenged over the years in an effort to maintain Allende's "authenticity" in relation to Chile's "official" history. For this reason any historical references to the post-1973 events in Allende's novels will be perceived as "authentic" since her connection to Salvador Allende implicitly reinforces a first hand experience account of the 1973 coup d'état. This, in turn,

⁴⁸ Another source of confusion is also being generated by Isabel Allende sharing the exact name with Salvador Allende's daughter, the politician and Chilean congress member Isabel Allende. The writer has publicly admitted (*El País*, 25 September 2004) that she has often been mistaken by what she calls her cousin – although strictly speaking this is not the case since Salvador Allende was Tomás Allende's (Isabel Allende's father) cousin.

positions her close to those in power, allowing her to speak not only from a position of truth but also from a position of authority. These arguments further suggest that her family history and carrying such a recognisable surname are assets that she and her publishers seem to have carefully exploited, although she resists this view by having claimed on several occasions that:

Si alguien puede vender algo, cualquier cosa, porque se llama Allende durante 20 años, es una cosa ridícula (*Efe News Services*, 24 July 2002).

As if anybody can sell anything, whatever it is, for 20 years because he/she is called Allende, it is ridiculous.

Se ha dicho que he vendido porque mi apellido es Allende: a ver si el apellido vendiera algo en alguna parte. Algunos creen que el marketing es una varita mágica. Si fuera por eso, los editores harían marketing de cada libro. Y no es así. Yo vendo mis libros porque a la gente le gusta leerlos (*El País*, 5 September 2003).

It has been said that I have sold because my surname is Allende: but only you'd have to see whether the surname sold anything anywhere. Some people believe that marketing is like a magic wand. If it was like that, publishers would market every single book and that is not the case. My books sell because people like to read them.

Although Allende's arguments are valid to a certain degree and aim at reducing the impact of her family name in the making of her success as a writer holding an international reputation, it would be hard to deny its significance at least at an early stage in her career. When Allende was still unknown as a writer, her family name was, nevertheless, bound to resonate within her potential Spanish or Latin American audience who would immediately think of Salvador Allende's overthrow and Pinochet's coup d'état in 1973. By strengthening and keeping this link alive, several press discourses situate her political convictions as those from the left and as somebody who is politically active:

But on September 11, 1973, President Salvador Allende, her father's cousin, and Chile's first Marxist leader, was killed in a military coup. She stayed for a few months, hiding friends in her house, smuggling out writings about what was going on (*The Times*, 8 January 2000).

Allende's politics are harder to categorise. She happily describes herself as a leftist and shares her surname with one of the great martyrs of the Latin American left (*The Financial Times*, 25 October 2003).

Quiso estar en Chile este 11 de septiembre, cuando se recuerdan 30 años de la muerte del presidente Allende, defendiendo a la democracia del golpe de Estado del general Augusto Pinochet (*El País*, 5 Septiembre 2003).

She wanted to be in Chile this 11 of September when they commemorate 30 years of Salvador Allende's death defending democracy against Augusto Pinochet's coup d'etat.

Moreover, in many of her interviews in the Spanish press, it appears that there has more recently been a shift in emphasis – given the current international political climate - with 1973 Chile relegated to the background and current US politics moved to the forefront. Allende's more recent political views explicitly loathe George W. Bush: 'Bush es un tejano que piensa en términos de petrolero y nos va a llevar a una Guerra, mundial tal vez, por el petróleo. No me hablen de Bush, por favor' (*Efe News Services*, 8 May 2003) ('Bush is a Texan who thinks in terms of oil and he is going to take us to war, perhaps a world war, because of oil. Don't talk to me about Bush, please') as well as condemn his foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq:

La autora de *La casa de los espíritus* atacó los fundamentalismos y expresó su militancia anti-Bush [...] Escribió *El bosque de los pigmeos* mientras se manifestaba con sus nietos en las calles contra la guerra de Irak (*El País*, 25 Septiembre 2004).

The author of The House of the Spirits attacked fundamentalisms and expressed her militant anti-Bush sentiment [...] She wrote 'Forest of the Pygmies' while she was demonstrating in the streets against the Iraq war with her grandchildren.

There are other several references which not only highlight the author's opposition during George W. Bush re-election campaign in 2003 (*Efe News Services*, 4 September 2003; *Efe News Services*, 22 June 2004) but equally her utter surprise when he was re-elected in 2004:

Allende, que no está “en absoluto acuerdo” con las políticas del presidente republicano reelegido, y se pregunta “cuánto daño pueden causar” en los próximos cuatro años, reconoce que le sorprendió que Bush ganara [...] (*Efe News Services*, 6 November 2004).

Allende who “doesn't agree at all” with the policies of the re-elected republican president, and wonders “how much damage they might cause” in the next four years, recognises she was surprised by Bush's victory [...]

But how do all of these political discourses contribute to Allende's success? On the one hand, it seems that by presenting herself - as well as being represented - as a politically committed writer, Allende is trying to complement the authenticity, sincerity and familiarity her writing from personal experience emanates, with more “serious” issues. This could be again interpreted as a move to be as inclusive as possible in what her writing has to offer: it is not only about family stories but also about crucial political events.

Furthermore, although the Allende-Chilean politics discourses have played a significant part in her “passport” to success, the shift from Chilean to US politics may have also been partly the result of a long process of ‘acculturation’ having moved to the US in the late 1980s ‘for sentimental reasons’ (Ramblado, 2003:98). What is relevant though is that this move certainly aims at sustaining her politically committed and “serious” image which, in dealing with politically controversial issues such as current US foreign policy in Iraq, will definitely keep resonating among her audience. Not only this, but other signs of her ‘acculturation’ could be seen in her public demonstration of

her commitment to America by empathising with those who suffered during 9/11:

For Allende, however, September 11 2001 was the traumatic moment she realised she felt herself American. Unable to stay neutral, she says she was “confronted with my sense of identity” [...] This moment also seems to have helped her make a step that her precursors tended not to make – that from exile to immigrant. It is, she says, a different state for the soul. “In the first case, one leaves by force, whether escaping or expelled, and feels like a victim who has had half their life stolen from them – in the second, one leaves as an adventure, the owner of one’s destiny. The exile looks to the past, lamenting the wounds: the immigrant looks to the future, disposed to take advantage of the opportunities within their grasp” (*The Financial Times*, 25 October 2003)

By expressing her allegiances to her adopted country and showing her compassion in such a sensitive moment - irrespective of the negative political opinions she displays in relation to the Bush administration - Allende seems to effectively gain the respect and admiration of her American audience. Interestingly though, ‘this traumatic moment’ – leaving aside the oddity of coinciding with the Chilean coup d’etat anniversary twenty eight years earlier - also gave Allende the opportunity to talk about her politics of exile, which also form an important part in the construction of her public image.

On many occasions, Allende’s exile has been presented as the direct consequence of Chile’s political upheaval in 1973: ‘At 30, she was forced to flee her country following General Pinochet’s coup during which her uncle Salvador Allende was murdered’ (*The Times*, 21 August 1993); ‘I have been a traveller, a political refugee and an immigrant. My family and I had to leave Chile after the military coup of 1973. We went to Venezuela, where we lived in exile for 15 years [...]’ (*The Observer*, 10 November 2002). This image has also suffered transformations over time, once more explicitly revealing the transformations

that Allende's identity may have undergone during her 'acculturation' process.

As a result, Allende has moved from being a political refugee to an immigrant:

There's a strong international component to a number of recent memoirs, [...] "Nation and tribe are confused in my mind", says Isabel Allende in *My Invented Country*, the story of a life divided between her native Chile and the America which became her home. "I never fit in anywhere", she adds, an observation that appears to be almost axiomatic as a starting point for the writing life (*The Independent*, 5 December 2003).

I have been a traveller, the daughter of diplomats, a political exile, an immigrant. So I don't think I have roots any more. I have them in books, in language, but not in a place. I think I am a good example of what California is all about. It's about immigration and diversity. And I'm very lucky because I'm legal in this country and I am my own boss, I don't have to be cleaning bathrooms. It's like slavery with a better name (*The Guardian*, 18 May 2005).

What the political refugee to immigrant transition suggests is a conscious change of status, 'a different state for the soul' (*The Financial Times*, 25 October 2003) which on some occasions inadvertently revealed Allende's coming to terms with 'feelings of betrayal' (Ramblado, 2003: 99) of her own roots as if she had finally accepted her new American status.

e) Isabel Allende: An Ambiguous Relationship with the Canon and the Academy

A final set of themes, which ambiguously construct and position Allende in relation to the canon and academy are those which connect her with the Latin American tradition of magical realism and García Márquez's iconic novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

On the one hand Allende is able to produce a 'highly successful novel [*The House of the Spirits*]' but 'she risks being accused of slavishly copying the

style and effects of García Márquez' (*The Financial Times*, 18 March 1989). When *The House of the Spirits* was published 'there was a definite sense of a major talent unfurled' but '*One Hundred Years of Solitude* was its archetype' (*The Financial Times*, 26 June 1993) and a '[...] mention of her name would invariably be followed by that of Gabriel García Márquez' (*The Guardian*, 18 May 2005). All of these excerpts suggest that Allende's success will always be shadowed by her "literary" debt to García Márquez instead of being regarded for her own merits. On the other hand, her identification with magical realism and Márquez could have equally helped raise her "literary" profile since she was also automatically associated with the "highbrow" Latin American *boom* generation: 'This insight [Allende's enforced exile] might apply to many of her predecessors in the group of Latin American writers now referred to as the "*boom* generation" who brought magical realism to the world's attention in the 1960s' (*The Financial Times*, 25 October 2003). Allende's close position in relation to the *boom* seems to have brought her academic recognition as well as led her to be pioneering the way within the male dominated world of the Latin American letters. Nonetheless, this academic recognition and "literary" status has not yet allowed Allende to shake off her "literary" debt and to a certain extent, it keeps reproducing an image which ambiguously situates her in terms of "literary" value. This ambiguous position is not just being constantly reproduced by press accounts but is currently being maintained by academic circles, in particular the Spanish academia.

In order to shed some light on this uncertain relationship and with the purpose of confirming my initial suspicions that Allende had formed part of undergraduate and post graduate courses in British institutions for many years

but more than likely had been excluded from the university curricula in Spain, I decided to conduct a small-scale survey via email⁴⁹ among several British and Spanish university academics. This small-scale survey was directed to academics involved in the teaching of undergraduate or postgraduate courses of contemporary Latin American literature.

Within Britain, I received replies from eight universities including: Edinburgh, Manchester, Cambridge, Birmingham, Durham, Salford, Nottingham and Exeter. All of them confirmed my initial hunch that Allende was being taught or had been taught in the past at least at an undergraduate level and their replies equally confirmed that British institutions had in theory shown no apparent reservations to include Allende in their curricula. This, in turn, meant that Allende was worth studying. She was not being excluded from academic courses because of being a commercial success as transpired from the replies received from the Spanish universities.

Within the Spanish academic context, although I only received four replies including two from the University of La Laguna, one from the University of Deusto and one from the University of Oviedo –although the University of Oviedo's reply simply stated that Allende had never been taught at any level – these were sufficient to observe a certain reluctance to consider Allende part of the teaching programme, and recognise her academic value as well as highlighting the different status Allende was holding within British and Spanish academia. The replies received from La Laguna and Deusto read as follows⁵⁰:

⁴⁹ See Appendix at the end of the thesis.

⁵⁰ Unlike in the British context where the replies received had methodically responded to the questions I had emailed, the Spanish fellow academics instead elaborated their replies without following the order of the questions possibly in an attempt to accommodate and fully represent the specificity of Allende's position within their teaching programmes.

Mi campo es el de la Literatura española, aunque oferto anualmente un seminario de libre elección sobre la mujer en la narrativa española contemporánea. Y cuando digo española me refiero a la literatura escrita en lengua española o castellana. Esto explica que casi todos los años se elija entre esas autoras a Isabel Allende, pues son los alumnos quienes deciden qué autores se comentan a lo largo del seminario. En los cursos pasados se habló de *Eva Luna* y *De amor y de sombra* (Universidad de La Laguna, 15 September 2004).

My field is Spanish literature although I offer a free choice seminar each year on women in contemporary Spanish fiction. And when I say Spanish, I mean literature written in the Spanish language. This explains why almost every year Isabel Allende is chosen among those writers, since it is the students who decide which authors they want to discuss during the seminar. In the past we discussed *Eva Luna* and *De amor y de sombra*.

En mis clases sobre Literatura española no existe ningún tema relacionado con Isabel Allende, pues queda fuera del material propio del programa. Tal vez en los cursos de doctorado sobre Literatura de género haya alguna mención pues representa un fenómeno de ventas que me interesa tratar. Igualmente quedaría abierta la posibilidad de trabajar sobre ella en los trabajos exigidos en Doctorado (Universidad de Deusto, 14 September 2004).

In my Spanish literature lectures there are no themes related to Isabel Allende since falls outside the programme's subject matter. Perhaps in the PhD courses on women's Literature there could be a mention since she represents a selling phenomenon I'm interested in. Equally it would be possible to work on her in the courses required for the PhD.

En la facultad de Filología de la Universidad de La Laguna (Islas Canarias), donde hay nueve asignaturas de Literatura hispanoamericana, la obra de Allende no es lectura obligatoria, aunque sí se comenta su importancia como fenómeno editorial en países europeos (Universidad de La Laguna, 13 September 2004).

Within the Philology faculty in La Laguna University (Canary Islands) where there are nine modules on Hispanic literature, Isabel Allende's works are not compulsory readings although we do discuss her importance as a publishing phenomenon in European countries.

Within the first reply from La Laguna, it is interesting to note how this fellow academic completely distances himself from his student choices. It seems that if

Allende gets taught it is the result of students' preferences but not his own. This emphasises once more the ambiguity surrounding Allende's position within Spanish academia since she is part of students' choices but on the verge of being excluded from academic curricula. What the other two replies suggest is that for Spanish academics, interest in Allende resides in studying her as a commercial phenomenon. It seems that for Spanish academics, if sales figures are high, this soon translates into "poor" quality literature – whatever "quality" means to those who make decisions to include or exclude certain authors from the curricula.

However, this common argument does not always work since for example Sánchez-Palencia (1997) has claimed that sales figures alone cannot explain how two well-known "literary" successes such as *Lady Chatterly's Lover* in Britain or *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in the US have never been considered "popular" - in the sense of "low"- (1997:21), excluded from the canon or regarded just in terms of a publishing phenomenon although millions of copies have been sold, like in Allende's case. There has to be other factors that contribute to Allende's exclusion from academic circles and which do not relate to her commercial success.

Aspects like the gender of her readership could provide some of the answers to the understanding of such exclusion. For example and just within the context of this research project, Allende's readership is mostly made out of women readers as shall be seen. This is not surprising since to begin with, Spanish women, for example, read more than their male counterparts. According to a survey conducted in Spain by Ministerio de Cultura in 1978, 1985 and 1990 and Sociedad General de Autores y Editores (SGAE) in 2000, these two sources reached identical conclusions regarding reading habits among Spanish men and

women; 22.4% of women read almost everyday, compared to 17.4% of men (Freixas, 2000: 42-43)⁵¹. In addition to this, *El País Semanal* published⁵² the results of a study set up by the commercial wing of the publishers *Grupo Planeta* which concluded that 70% of women buy books⁵³. These results therefore reinforce the idea that most of Allende's readers are women. Similarly, Jenny Hartley's (2002) research among 350 reading groups in the UK shows that 69% of the reading groups she contacted were all women, whereas only 4% were all men (2002:25). These figures further suggest that even in groups, reading is far more common among women than men. But do these results impact on Allende's perception as a "popular" writer, in the sense of appealing to certain "popular" groups of readers such as women? Perhaps the answer lies in the relationship existing between gender and certain cultural practices. Women seem to hold a reputation for reading "popular" genres that are "popular" for creating false illusions for their women readers, as well as being of little "literary" value (Sánchez-Palencia, 1997: 41-42). What Sánchez-Palencia further argues is that these genres should, instead, be regarded as "popular" because they know: 'como inscribir –ya sea abierta o simbólicamente –los verdaderos problemas y tensiones de la experiencia femenina, proporcionándoles aunque sea en un plano utópico, soluciones satisfactorias' (*ibid*) ('how to inscribe – either openly or symbolically – the real problems and tensions of feminine experience, offering, although at a utopian level, satisfactory solutions to them'). Using Ricoeur's own terminology, these genres are "popular" in the sense that they enable readers' worlds to connect to the 'world of the text', and where

⁵¹ These results did not mention existing differences between groups according to age, education or occupation.

⁵² This article appeared on the 23rd of April 2000. (See Bibliography for details).

⁵³ This study did not offer a breakdown by genre so it is difficult to know what percentage corresponds to fiction as believed one of the most "popular" genre among women.

women in particular, are able to relate to their own lives the meanings they produce from the texts. What the following chapters in this thesis reveal is whether the responses given by the women readers in British and Spanish groups suggest that Allende is "popular" in the sense of offering British and Spanish women readers 'satisfactory solutions' to their own lives.

Not only this, but working in conflation with the negativity attached to the gender of Allende's readership is the author's gender itself. Christine Bridgwood (1986) argues that women's writing tends to be devalued since the way in which certain genres like family sagas are marketed suggests that women simply write 'what they know' and therefore their writing skills are diminished, while reasserting the naturalness of women only writing about certain themes. In this sense, being writer and woman will automatically veer off the author's work towards "popular" genres. This could represent another reason to explain why Allende's position in the canon and within Spanish academic circles is marked by exclusion rather than inclusion but certainly does not fully solve the ambiguity existing around her "literary" position. Perhaps once more this ambiguity and/or duality surrounding Allende's "literary" status – and by extension her other public discourses and images - is key in generating her appeal. This could be the result of Allende's effort to create an all-inclusive image for herself and her work that can equally satisfy the ordinary as well as sophisticated and/or academic reader.

Conclusion

This chapter began by considering the various factors that favourably contributed and encouraged the initial production and consumption of Allende's *The House of the Spirits* in Spain. Nevertheless, the focus of this chapter has been to analyse the themes and discourses surrounding her public press representations cross-culturally. These themes and discourses comprise the "difference" of her physical appearance, the unveiling of her private and "real" self - and how this private realm informs her fiction - the relevance of her family name and its connection to Chilean politics, and her position in relation to Latin American "literary" traditions. Altogether, these discourses around her public representation construct an appealing public image of Allende, which in turn, influences readers' responses to her novels as shall be seen later on in the thesis.

This chapter has also shown that her public appeal lies in her projections of sincerity and authenticity as well as in the rather inclusive image that she seeks to create through the various dichotomies that her public discourses generate. Allende's appealing image moves between the physically small but the big personality; the ordinary but the exotic; the woman novelist but politically committed; the "literary" recognised but the "popular"/publishing phenomenon, excluded from academia. These dichotomies are precisely at the heart of Allende's success as this chapter has endeavoured to demonstrate from a production and consumption approach.

Chapter Four

British and Spanish Readers' Responses to Isabel

Allende's Fictional Characters

Introduction

In this chapter, I examine British and Spanish readers' responses to Allende's fictional characters across different novels. I initially evaluate which aspects of Allende's characterization attracted British and Spanish readers and for what reasons. I also analyse what type(s) of involvement readers established with Allende's fictional characters, placing particular emphasis on the British readers' responses since the Spanish turned out to be scarce in relation to this aspect.

Finally, in this more general overview on Allende's fictional characters, I examine how British and Spanish groups identified certain differences in the treatment of female and male characters, situating the former as central. Although the Spanish readers placed more emphasis and attention on this aspect – for reasons that I explain later in the chapter - equally, British readers acknowledged this differentiation occurring between female and male representation.

The Extra-Ordinary Versus the Ordinary

A: [...] She's [Isabel Allende] pieced together three sets of stories that all interlink with these wonderful characters (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

D: She's [Isabel Allende] got this wonderful family to write about, she's got these fantastic characters and she remembers so well, she remembers when her uncle used to play when they were little, with such detail out of her childhood, it's so fascinating (Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*).

A: All the characters are incredible, I found them so gripping (Bingham Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

Some British readers used adjectives such as 'wonderful', 'fantastic' and 'incredible' to describe Allende's fictional characters. This common choice of adjectives seems to echo readers' positive relationship with Allende's characters. On the other hand, these adjectives suggest, in addition, that Allende's fictional characters may also be full of surprises, wonder, which may ultimately frustrate readers' assessment of characters' 'life-likeness',⁵⁴ that is, if they could be identified as "real" or not. Spanish readers differed from their British counterparts since the language used to describe Allende's characters⁵⁵ did not include any explicit references to 'fascination' or 'wonder'. Spanish readers seemed to identify characters as "real" in a mimetic sense:

También me parecen casi todos muy reales, es como si les conociera y estuviera describiendo a un amigo íntimo, da muchos detalles del carácter, los ojos, la mirada (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

⁵⁴ Term used by Lilian Furst (1992) in her introduction to her selected essays on realism.

⁵⁵ When using the phrase 'Allende's characters' although their fictional qualities may not be explicitly acknowledged, their constructedness is embedded and should be understood by the reader of this thesis at all times.

Almost all [the characters] seem very real to me as well, it's as if I knew them and was describing a close friend, she [Allende] gives a lot of details about their temperament, their eyes, their gaze.

This reader's mimetic understanding was also supported by the explicit reference made to the characters' physical detailed description as ultimately contributing to their recognition as "real", that is, the above reader regarded the characters' physical description as a key feature to accomplish realistic status. Nonetheless, what intrigued me from the El Palo reader's comment was the use of the word 'casi' ('almost'), which in the context of her comment, suggests that not all of Allende's characters are believable and therefore "real". What becomes impossible to determine is which characters this reader is referring to, who may not belong to the "real". Besides, this comment showed that some Spanish readers may also have had reservations towards some of Allende's characters in terms of their credibility.

There are other several aspects that readers considered when claiming characters' verisimilitude and plausibility. According to some British readers, Allende's fictional characters were also 'three-dimensional', 'rich' 'interesting', 'true-born man' or not 'too card-board':

A: Characters are three-dimensional and interesting and I think she [Allende] generally does that (Nottingham Reading Group 1, *Daughter of Fortune*).

A: [...] but the characters were so rich and interesting, I thought they were absolutely wonderful, the fact that they weren't black or white; they were just eccentric but also believable, I mean touchable that they were so wonderful (Lincoln Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*)

B: I think they [the characters] are quite satisfactory in terms of credibility, Amanda is one type of person and the prostitute is another type, they do seem true-born man [sic], they do seem in their ability through the book, they do seem true-type, they have integrity when they re-appear, they behave in the same way, I

found them quite satisfactory and they don't feel too card-board (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

This group of adjectives suggest that some British readers also assessed Allende's characters' realistic status by 'wholeness' (Long, 1987:323) or using E.M. Forster concept, in terms of 'roundness'⁵⁶ as well as regarding them as psychologically motivated characters⁵⁷. This feature appeared to be essential in the making of characters as more 'believable', 'touchable', 'satisfactory in terms of credibility' and subsequently "real".

Furthermore, what made characters 'round' was their inner conflicts since 'they weren't black or white' because 'somos una parte oscura y una parte clara' ('everybody has got a dark side'):

Bibliotecario: Yo no creo que justifique al personaje, sino que intenta ver otra arista del personaje, que cada uno de nosotros somos una parte oscura y una parte clara porque aquí no hay nadie que sea 'santo' que yo sepa, vamos [...] entonces yo creo que intenta ver, incluso los dictadores más horribles tienen su parte humana, con sus nietos, no se los comen, pero son dictadores, son perversos, tienen una zona suya perversa cien por cien que es la que sacan la mayoría de las veces, o [dirigiéndose a una lectora en el grupo] ¿tú crees B que Isabel Allende intenta justificar los personajes perversos o intenta suavizarlos, o simplemente nos hace ver que son personas? (Campanillas, *La casa de los espíritus*).

Librarian [man]: I don't think she [Allende] justifies a character but she tries to show a different side to the character, that is, everybody has got a dark side because here there are no 'saints' as far as I know [...] so I think that she [Allende] tries to see, even the most horrible dictatorships have a human side; when they are

⁵⁶ E.M. Forster in his *Aspects of the Novel* (1927) established the distinction between 'flat' and 'round' characters, the first one being designed to refer to those characters lacking any depth or development whereas the term 'round' signified the opposite, characters having depth, complexity and who developed along the way with the narrative.

⁵⁷ Allende's critic Marcelo Coddou equally shares a similar view with British readers when he considers Allende's characters psychologically motivated by referring to them in the following terms 'Isabel Allende nos entrega muy concretos motivantes de las conductas asumidas por sus personajes. Ello equivale a decir que éstos responden no tan sólo a la psicología que les atribuye [...] sino [...] a la coherencia de su situación' (1988:114) ('Isabel Allende offers us quite specific motives for her characters' behaviour. This is to say that not only do they respond to the psychology attributed to them [...] but also [...] to the coherence of their situation').

with their grandchildren they do not eat them but they still are dictators, they are wicked, they have a side that's a hundred per cent wicked which is the only one they show most of the time or Do you think B that Isabel Allende tries to justify the evil characters or tries to soften them or is she simply trying to show us that they are people? [directing this question to a woman member in the group].

What is interesting from the above librarian's comment is the emphasis placed on the characters' 'genuineness',⁵⁸ as another key feature to grant realistic status. According to this librarian, not only positive qualities are important but also those that damn the characters morally. It is precisely this "good" and "evil" combination that makes characters more credible judging by further readers' comments in the same group:

Trata a la gente con mucho cariño, no se refleja mucho los gestos negativos sino los positivos, incluso en las personas más desagradables, siempre le dice el lado positivo de esa persona, de cómo es, como para hacerte una atmósfera como más agradable (El Palo, La casa de los espíritus).

She [Isabel Allende] treats people lovingly, you don't see the negative aspects so much as the positive ones, even with the most unpleasant characters, she always mentions that person's positive side, what they're like, as if she wants to make the atmosphere more pleasant for you.

Es que aunque sea un personaje lo caracterice ella [Isabel Allende] como el más malo, lo describe que lo hace bueno, hace que se quiera; cada uno con sus defectos con lo que tenga, pero todos son importantes, siempre les saca algo bueno (Campanillas, La casa de los espíritus).

The thing is, even when she [Allende] identifies a character as the worst of the lot, the way she describes them makes them good, she makes you love them; everybody with their own weaknesses, but they're all important, she [Allende] always finds something good in them.

⁵⁸ The category of 'genuineness' has also been used by Ien Ang (1985) when analysing viewers' descriptions of *Dallas*' characters arguing that 'the more genuine a character appears to be, the more he or she is valued' (1985:33).

The above readers seemed not to have minded how “evil” characters were. On the contrary, what the above comments seem to suggest is that Allende possesses the ability to transform “evil” characters into pleasant or “good”, allowing readers to develop in this way a stronger emotional involvement with them.

Some British readers seemed to have also reached a compromise in their acceptance of Allende's characters since although unconventional, as they may appear to be, they also became a source of entertainment and enjoyment:

A: [...] I felt with the characters that they were completely loopy and yet she [Isabel Allende] makes you kind of fond of them, [somebody else agrees in the background] I know there are some awful, awful ones around but at the same time if they were so loopy, you got to the stage you would be so fed up with them that you wouldn't carry on, but you do carry on because you actually, they've got you on their side (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

It seems that the above reader felt that Allende's characters' instances of 'loopyness' did not matter so much since the fascination with the 'wonderful' or not so familiar characteristics of the characters was what may have kept this reader's interest alive to the point that characters became 'gripping', 'fond of them' or 'they've got you on their side'.

On the other hand, the overall acceptance felt by some British readers with regard to Allende's fictional characters could be explained, perhaps, not by a compromise on the part of the British readers but because according to the film critics Julia Hallam and Margaret Marshment (2000) 'a fiction film may be considered realistic even if the characters, setting and situation are unfamiliar to the viewer, provided the totality of the fictional world is considered to be a convincing portrayal of the characters and the world they inhabit' (2000:124). Although the world that Allende's characters inhabit may be perceived as rather

exotic or unfamiliar, at the same time, this same world makes perfect sense within its own reality. This is what seems to count when some British readers exercised their own judgement about the plausibility of Allende's characters and their Chilean world, but more importantly, the unfamiliar and exotic may have also functioned as a mechanism of attraction as well as distancing for some readers.

What appears to be happening in the British context is that on the one hand, Allende's fictional characters may have pushed to the limits some of the realist boundaries some British readers feel comfortable with and accustomed to, but on the other, characters' exotic and unfamiliar traits equally appear to satisfy some British readers. By entering the unknown and unrecognisable worlds of Allende's characters some British readers may experience certain pleasures that only the exotic in Allende can satisfy.

Too Many Characters: A Hindrance to Character Development

Comments about the large number of characters appearing in Allende's novels were also an aspect discussed among some British and Spanish groups:

B: There were so many characters that I found it difficult to read, to remember who they were (Bingham Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

C: For a while you wouldn't hear about them for ages and suddenly they would pop up again (Bingham Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

A: I mean, really I know I haven't finished [the book] yet but there are so many characters packed in (Bingham Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

The above readers appeared to express certain dislike about the proliferation of so many different characters since this made their reading 'difficult', 'difficult' because some readers could not recall who they were, especially if characters disappeared from the narrative for lengthy periods. It is interesting to note how reader A expressed her dislike by using the words 'packed in', as if the numerous characters had been thrown together in the narrative for the sake of having as many as possible.

Some Spanish readers equated there being too many characters to a lack of depth: 'a los personajes como si les falta un poco de profundidad, hay personajes que se queda ... como que no llega a retratarlo muy bien' (Biblioteca Guadalajara 1, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('the characters, they lack some depth, there are characters who don't ... she [Allende] does not portray them very well') or as if Allende tried to compensate this lack of in-depth characterization by offering readers an array of characters' traits which only served the purpose of space filling:

Hay personajes en los que está mucho y hay otros en los que pasa como muy por encima, muchos detalles pero muy rápido, que es como para rellenar el libro [...] (Biblioteca de Marchamalo, *Paula*).

There are characters that she dwells on a lot and there are others she [Allende] treats superficially, gives a lot of detail but very quickly, as if she wanted to fill out the book [...]

Similarly, the following reader's main concern was not being able to get to know the characters since some were just sketched and did not appear too often in the narrative:

A: That was my only problem with them [characters], they were all very good, all the characters, the Indian, the mother, the grandmother, the godmother, all these mothers, all the people she [Eva] worked for, the priest, the politician and somehow I felt that

I was only going to know so much about these people and I was actually never going to know that much about any of them and I got to the end and I felt I knew a bit about everybody but not a lot about anybody (Nottingham Reading Group 2, *Eva Luna*).

For this British reader the lack of in-depth characterization seemed to have been detrimental to the significance of the work since:

A: [...] it would have been a more profound book if she hadn't had to bring so many people in and trying to put so much into that book; it almost seems like a waste of material, you could have three books in one!! She's got enough writing for life!! (Nottingham Library, *The House of the Spirits*).

These different opinions suggest that some readers' dislike towards the use of large numbers of characters was linked to readers' understanding of what "good" or "bad" literature consists of. In this case, the use of the word 'profound' was indicative of how this reader felt about the book generally. According to this reader, *The House of the Spirits* was not as insightful as expected since there were far too many characters and Allende could not devote enough time and space to create 'round' characters. Instead, some readers felt that Allende superficially sketched the characters and this was automatically interpreted as a sign of "bad" literature since these readers associate "good" with fully 'round' characters.

These comments, though, may also be connected with issues around taste as well as groups' perception of themselves as already discussed in chapter two. The vast majority of British groups appeared to want to be perceived as discerning and intellectual consumers of "high" cultural forms. Spanish groups similarly had the objective to educate readers' taste given the strong didactic drive running through some of the groups. These context-related factors perhaps contributed to readers' interpretations of large number of characters in such negative light, since in particular, in the British context, readers' intellectual self-

identity may be compromised if members' reading choices became associated with "low" literature forms.

In addition to the above, the use of large numbers of characters also became connected to the use of cameos:

C: [...] the fact that there were so many characters and that they all had that little place in the story, you know, you could not imagine them not being in, ... there's actually nothing in excess, they might be all cameos but they have a reason for being there, they all flopped in, you know, they sort of describe little bits of the story [...] (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

In this instance, this British reader expressed a more positive approach since all the different characters had a reason to be in the story despite their brief appearances or flat traits. Overall, the negative nature of the comments discussed in this section was mostly directed to the secondary characters and not to the main ones. Also, what needs to be taken into account is that British and Spanish readers' preoccupation with superficially sketched characters perhaps resides in how the modern novel has instituted the use of characters as human individuals with their own individual experiences of the "real" world. For this reason, and as a modern British or Spanish reader of Allende, being able to travel along a character development into individualization, accentuates once more the importance of how 'round' or psychologically motivated characters are, as well as how embedded and internalised realist conventions are in these readers' treatment of Allende's characters.

Readers' Involvement with Allende's Characters

British and Spanish readers' involvement with Allende's characters was intimately related to the readers' participation in the world of the characters. This was possible because quite often Allende's characters were being identified as "real". For example, some women readers believed that one gets involved with those characters who 'están más cerca de actuar de como tu actuarías o como te gustaría actuar, con otros te pones en contra y te ayudan a comprender mejor cosas de la vida cotidiana' (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 3, *Retrato en Sepia*) ('are closer to behaving as you'd behave, or you'd like to behave, with others you react against them [characters] and they help you to understand things in your daily life') or 'Nos ponemos en su situación, qué haríamos, qué no haríamos' (Biblioteca de Marchamalo, *Paula*) ('We put ourselves in their situation, what we would do, what we wouldn't do'). Likewise these Spanish readers, and as Ang's (1985) research suggested, it was characters' credibility that made *Dallas* viewers get involved with the characters.

Ang based her assumptions on the theories presented by the Belgian media theoretician Jean-Marie Piemme. According to Piemme, 'it is impossible to watch a television serial without some degree of personal involvement' and 'sharing the feelings of the characters, discussing their psychological motivations and their conduct [...] as well as 'living their world' (Piemme in Ang 1985:28) is what makes the process of involvement possible. More important for Ang was not just 'living their world' but also 'imagining the characters as real people' that

became a 'necessary precondition for the involvement of viewers' (1985:30)⁵⁹. Nonetheless, even if Ang's 'necessary precondition' failed, that is, if characters were to be perceived by viewers/readers as "unreal" or as different to the "real" people they know or have experience of, this would not preclude viewers/readers' involvement since this may only occur at an emotional level. Character involvement does not only occur when the reader shares 'similar experiences' with characters⁶⁰ or can establish a certain psychological resemblance between characters and the "real" people the reader knows and has experience of, as illustrated by the following British reader response:

A: I didn't feel involved with the characters but I still felt fascinated by them but not in the way that you feel when you read about people who are more similar to ourselves and with similar experiences (Nottingham Library, *The House of the Spirits*).

It appears that the above reader's 'fascination' with Allende's characters originated in the unusual characteristics or behaviour that set Allende's characters apart from what this reader considered the norm in "real" people. Being "different" to the reader's expectations does not necessarily have to be negative as it can awaken readers' appetite for exploring different subject positions although this may feel uncomfortable at times.

This is why Ang's work on *Dallas* also becomes relevant, since it offers an excellent starting point to analyse from a feminist perspective how viewers' melodramatic identifications encouraged them to explore new subject positions.

⁵⁹ Allende's critic, Marcelo Coddou also shares similar views to Piemme but his arguments originate in a direct analysis of Allende's 'pretensión de verdad literaria' ('pretension of literary truth') (1988:113) and the impact this has on the construction of her characters. He claims that Allende's characters not only possess a 'function' – using Propp's terminology – but also 'se muestran "almas", seres vivos que tanto llaman la atención de lectores que se sienten conmovidos por sus avatares' ('characters show themselves to be "souls", human beings that grab the readers' attention so much since they feel moved by their [characters] tribulations').

⁶⁰ Readers do not have to experience the same or similar experiences as characters do but to possess the ability to imagine how it may feel when experiencing similar circumstances to the characters (Hallam and Marshment, 2000)

Ang began by interrogating whether images of women like the one represented by the character Sue Ellen in *Dallas* were either damaging or on the contrary offering women viewers' spaces to negotiate new identities in a safe way. Ang started by claiming that 'Sue Ellen cannot be conceptualized as a realistic image of women [...] but as symbolic realization of feminine subject positions with which viewers can identify *in fantasy*' [her emphasis] (Ang, 1997:162). According to Ang, the concept of fantasy is crucial since 'it involves the imaginary occupation of other subject positions – realistic or not- which are outside the scope of our everyday social and cultural identities' (*ibid*, 163). What interested me most from these arguments were their political implications since the acts of fantasizing with new subject positions may open up some 'unconstrained spaces in which socially impossible or unacceptable subject positions [...] can be adopted' (*ibid*,164). This is what some of the British and Spanish women – and some men - readers have done since identities, either masculine or feminine, are in constant negotiation and redefinition. The following section in this chapter, as well as chapters five and six, offer ample opportunity to explore in more detail this aspect of Ang's theories.

In addition to this, and to make sense of the several British readers' comments in relation to the ways in which they defined their involvement with Allende's characters, I also found the 'cognitive' approach to viewers' mechanisms of identification particularly useful. Contrary to psychoanalytic approaches, this approach relies on the integration of cognition and emotion altogether, rather than treating each of these elements independently from each other as film critics Hallam and Marshment (2000:130-131) explain on their co-authored book *Realism and Popular Cinema*. These film critics draw upon the

work of other film theoreticians such as Noel Carroll and Murray Smith to develop their own 'cognitive' system of classification that I shall be using in the analysis of some British readers' responses.

Unlike Ang's approach primarily based on the emotional response viewers displayed to the characters and their situations in *Dallas*, the 'cognitive' approach departs from this type of identification based on an emotional response. This occurs because, according to Noel Carroll, 'very often spectators do not have or share identical or same emotions of the characters in question' (Carroll in Hallam and Marshment, 2000:132). For this reason, Hallam and Marshment borrow Murray Smith's concept of 'allegiance' since it understands viewers identifications with characters in terms of 'moral evaluation' rather than 'emotional engagement' (2000:134). However, although Hallam and Marshment welcome the 'moral' approach suggested by Smith, they still find the term 'allegiance' too broad of a category, arguing in turn for a more comprehensive schema that distinguishes the following types of what they call 'alignment': 'intellectual, interest, concern, moral, aesthetic and emotional alignment' (*ibid*). The last type of alignment, 'emotional alignment' would nonetheless correspond to Ang's emotional identifications. What is interesting about this category is that it cannot occur without any other types of alignment. According to Hallam and Marshment, this does not necessarily imply that 'emotional alignment' can only be 'constructed' through other types of alignments since 'emotional engagement in a fiction is not primarily premised upon a character, but on their situation' (*ibid*, 137).

Following on from this 'cognitive' approach, the comments from the male Lincoln librarian, reader C from Birmingham Reading Group 2 and reader

A from Lincoln Library could be categorised as 'interest alignment' (Hallam and Marshment, 2000:135) since their involvement with the characters was based on their curiosity to find out what was going to happen to the characters, their fate:

Librarian: I couldn't sympathise with the characters, it was interesting to watch what was happening to the characters, I enjoyed it but actually caring too much as people never really felt that way towards the characters, I suppose that was a negative thing (Lincoln Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

C: Going back to characterisation though, my test is if they [characters] didn't produce [...] you didn't empathise with them, you wouldn't care what happen to them but I do care what happens to them, I was particularly interested in what happened too [...] (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

A: I didn't feel sympathy for any of the characters but I was interested in every single one, as normally in a book you're interested in one or maybe two but I wanted to know what was happening to every single character in the book [...] There wasn't anything of any of the characters that you thought 'I don't understand what they did' you knew why every character acted and thought the way they did because you knew the history of them so well (Lincoln Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

Readers with an 'interest alignment' seem to be 'investing certain hope and/or fear in relation to the fate of the character(s)' (*ibid*) but more importantly, they do not necessarily have to identify with the characters at a denotative level, recognising them as "real" people to develop such an interest. For this reason, readers initially distanced themselves from the characters by stating that: 'I couldn't sympathise [...]', 'I didn't feel sympathy [...]'.

On the other hand, the second half of reader's A extract and the following from Lincoln reader D described a different type of relationship with Allende's characters which could be identified as 'moral alignment':

D: I'm not keen on what people are like [...] I like if you could actually understand why the people acted like they did, how they changed and why they behaved in such a manner [...] no friendship with the characters [...] (Lincoln Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

The above reader's relationship with Allende's characters is based on understanding the characters' actions and behaviour or as whether readers are prepared to share the 'text's evaluation of the character' or not (Hallam and Marshment, 2000:135). This means that 'a text may present the character(s) and their concerns as deserving of validation or condemnation [...] to accepted moral criteria' (*ibid*) and this is achieved through evaluating characters' actions and behaviour. However, this evaluation of characters' behaviour was possible for these readers because they had experienced their actions and behaviour as "real". A clear example of this is the comment from Lincoln Reader B who appeared to have experienced Allende's fictional world as "real", given her own personal history:

B: For me the first half was a recognition, this way I've known my own mother and then the second half I felt detached because it's so bad that I couldn't identify with that; [...] characters as human beings, in this case you see them as human beings (Lincoln Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

For the above woman reader of Argentinean origins, what *The House of the Spirits* and its characters represented felt very close to her past lived experiences. For this reason, she chose the word 'recognition' rather than 'empathy' or 'sympathy' to describe her relationship with the characters. Film theoretician Murray Smith refers to the term 'recognition' to explain 'the initial process by which a spectator recognises a set of cinematic signs, a character in a fiction, through mimetic reference to human beings as they exist in the real world' (Smith in Hallam and Marshment, 2000:133). This idea seems to be transferable to the world of the readers too, being this theoretical assertion reflected in the words of Reader B. On the one hand, Reader B felt so close to the fictional

characters because she was able to identify some members of her own family in them, but on the other hand, this same closeness made her want to feel detached when the fictional story took a cruel turn during Salvador Allende's political overthrow. This particular reaction could be understood as a way of dealing with the past. For this reader, it may have been easier to deal with painful memories by simply not feeling part of them, trying to cut any ties with what happened.

In addition, it is interesting to note how Lincoln reader B was identifying *as* [my emphasis] a character and not *with* [my emphasis] a character. This means that this reader appeared to share the same or similar experiences to the characters - although fictional - not only at an emotional but also at a cognitive level. It would be interesting to interrogate if this isolated response from reader B would have been commonplace if *The House of the Spirits* had been read among a group of South American readers rather than British or Spanish.

It could be suggested that since most British and Spanish readers did not experience similar accounts to those represented in the novel, it is for this reason that their involvement with the characters in *The House of the Spirits* were described not in 'recognition' terms as happened with the above Argentinean reader.

Central Female Characterization versus Peripheral Male Characterization

One of the most striking differences, which set British and Spanish readers apart, was the constant references made by some Spanish readers to Allende's biased treatment in favour of female characters. To understand what prompted some Spanish readers to emphasise this differential treatment between female and male

characters, it is important to remember the context in which some Spanish readers had positioned themselves to read Allende.

Firstly, most of the Spanish reading groups were familiar with more than one of Allende's novels, - having read and discussed an average of two or three as part of their reading group programme as explicitly noted in chapter two - and were consequently equipped to comment with an array of characters in mind. This was in sharp contrast to the limited experience of just one Allende novel read in most of the British reading groups.

The second reason is connected with the Spanish groups' origins and gender composition. Given that some reading groups were made up of women readers in their entirety and this, combined with the educational ethos that these groups seemed to retain from their original function as literacy groups, a feminist approach appeared to be favoured among some group discussions, as reflected in the comments made by this woman reader in the Campanillas group:

C: Porque yo creo que muchos personajes que ella realza ahí en las mujeres ha tenido que ver mucho el machismo porque Latinoamérica es muy machista; porque la mujer que está fregando los platos, que parece que te lo pone como si estuviera fregando los platos en una nube, es un hecho cotidiano que la mujer tiene que hacer día por día y lo tenía que hacer por narices, porque no te obligaban de palabra pero lo tenías que hacer desde que nacías y entonces ahí tiene que ver mucho el machismo, y yo por eso creo que ella realza tanto el personaje femenino porque ha vivido en una sociedad muy machista (Campanillas, *La casa de los espíritus*).

Because I think that a lot of the characters she [Isabel Allende] enhances, in the case of women, machismo had a lot to do with it because Latin America is very much a machismo society; because when a woman's doing the washing up, it's like she [Allende] puts it like she's doing the washing up in the clouds, it is a daily chore which women have to do day after day and they just had to do it, because they didn't make you do it verbally, but you had to do it since you were born; so there machismo has a lot to do with it, and so that's why I think she [Allende] emphasises female

characters so much, because she has lived in a very machismo society.

The above woman reader appears to be certain about why female characters enjoy a privileged treatment by Allende. For this reader, Allende's first hand experience of how it feels to be part of a society dominated by men where women had little choice, resulted in her making a conscious decision to enhance the role of female characters and represent them in a more positive light than their male counterparts. Moreover, this comment is also significant since it is connected to some of the issues already discussed in chapter three. It seems that this reader's views may have been influenced by Allende's own public discourses about the role and position women hold in Latin American societies. More importantly, this example confirms the influence that Allende's own production has had in shaping some readers' readings of her novels. María de la Cinta Ramblado Minero (2003) in her monograph *Isabel Allende's Self-Writing: Trespassing the Boundaries of Fiction and Autobiography*, has also discussed this element which she refers to as Allende's 'fictionalising strategies'. Ramblado understands them in the following terms:

modes of transforming experience, perceptions and memories into fiction. In this sense, the fiction produced may contain a self-representational element that tends to be neutralised by the so-called features of the work, such as narrative omniscience or heteroglossia, in contrast with the traditional first-person narrative associated with autobiography (2003:47).

Ramblado's work offers a detailed account of how these 'fictionalising strategies' function in Allende's first three novels, *The House of the Spirits*, *Of Love and Shadows* and *Eva Luna* and how an allegorical element in her plots, characters, events and settings can also be identified as part of the 'fictionalising strategies' Allende uses. What is relevant to the above reader's comment is the

idea that through her fiction, Allende is 'portraying her ideology' (*ibid*, 80), that is, Allende's feminism in the form of 'realzar al personaje femenino' ('enhance female characters') being influenced by her own experiences of *machismo* in Latin America. Besides, this close connection between Allende's fiction and her public discourses 'makes the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction blurred' (*ibid*, 80) as shall be discussed in detail when analysing readers' responses to *Paula* in chapter six.

Some Spanish readers equally highlighted that the female characters were taking the leading roles influencing narrative development: 'los que tienen más papel y más fuerza en el libro' (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 1, *Hija de la fortuna*) ('those who have more of a role and more strength in the book'). This suggests that perhaps roles that readers thought to be traditionally assigned to male characters had been on this occasion transferred to the female. Laura Mulvey's (1989) seminal work *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* also seems to throw light on understanding this reader's position. Mulvey argues from a feminist psychoanalytic perspective that classical Hollywood films have traditionally characterized women as passive and men as active and carrying the narrative forward. Women's passive function was therefore aimed at satisfying the male gaze through the cinematic techniques of fetishism and voyeurism. Mulvey's arguments illustrate the constant to which women's images are being subjected when they are being recurrently represented as receivers of the actions rather than doers. According to some Spanish readers, some of Allende's female characters breach this traditional approach since they are the doers, they are active and carry the narrative forward:

B: Sí, a mí me gusta; en principio son mujeres muy luchadoras y de estar en malas situaciones en seguida se sitúan y luego son

mujeres que aunque siendo feministas, siempre se refugian en un personaje hombre [...] no son mujeres de rompe y rasga y en todas la novelas a mí si me llama la atención que ... intentan buscarse la vida ella solas, muy negociantas, les sale todo bien, todos los negocios e historias [...] pero que a los hombres tampoco los maltrata, yo no me refiero a que es una feminista extremista [Isabel Allende] (Biblioteca de Guadalajara 1, *La casa de los espíritus*).

Yes, I like it; for one thing, the women are fighters and if they are in a bad situation straightaway they get to grips with it and then they are women who though they're feminists, they always seek refuge in a man [...] they are not too radical and what catches my attention in all her novels is that ... [they] try to sort their lives out by themselves, they are very business minded, every thing turns out well for them, their business and everything [...] but she [Allende] does not demean men either, I am not saying that she [Allende] is an extreme feminist.

This Spanish reader described Allende's female characters as real 'fighters' as well as 'feminists' since they were very capable in conducting and succeeding in their business. Also, it seemed that for this reader, being a feminist did not exclude having a dependant relationship to men. In fact, what may seem contradictory in terms, - feminism and at the same time subjection to the patriarchal order – agrees with what Beatriz Sarlo refers to as 'politics as passion' (Sarlo, 1991: 238). Arguing from a Latin American feminist perspective, Sarlo tries to bridge together the terms women, history and ideology so women are no longer excluded from what she calls 'civitas'. Sarlo, then, goes on to identify three different styles of women's discourse when they enter the political debate and these are 'politics as reason, politics as passion and politics as action' (*ibid*).

What interests me from Sarlo's arguments is the concept of 'politics as passion' defined as 'women's relation to the public sphere within the space drawn by certain distinctive traits of the feminine image' (*ibid*, 240). These distinctive traits are 'subjectivity, intuition and feeling', values which have

traditionally been recognised as 'typically feminine' (*ibid*). In the context of Allende's characters, the feeling of love for a political activist, for example, can help women fulfil themselves. The character of Alba, in her love for Miguel in *The House of the Spirits*, is able to fulfil herself, both in the private and public spheres. Perhaps, what attracts some Spanish women readers about Allende's female characters is that they are capable of fulfilling themselves as women without abandoning their femininity. For these readers, Allende's female characters are appealing since they do not need to suppress their feminine qualities but use them to their own advantage. Not only this, as the woman librarian in Azuqueca explained, Allende's female characters do a lot more for women readers:

Bibliotecaria: Yo creo que hay una cosa importante en Isabel Allende, yo creo que conecta bastante con las mujeres, no sé los hombres luego nos cuentas, pero yo creo que a las mujeres es una especie de revulsivo, para que nos planteemos nuestra situación como estamos y que nos presente modelos de mujer que son valientes, y que eso hace que tire de nosotros, ¿por qué nos engancha en esa lectura? Porque en el fondo nos gustaría ser esas protagonistas tuyas o por lo menos nos gustaría dar un toque a nuestra vida y despertar un poco, que son personajes muy vitales, muy vivos, muy lanzados, muy que viven su vida, que en general las mujeres estamos llamadas a vivir la vida de todos menos la nuestra, y ella sus personajes viven su vida, sobre todo las mujeres (Biblioteca de Azuqueca, 1, *Hija de la fortuna*).

Librarian [woman]: I think there is an important thing in Isabel Allende, I think she connects with women a lot, I don't know about men, you [referring to myself] tell us later, but I think that for women this is a kind of sharp shock so we think about our situation, how we are and she offers us women role models who are brave, and this what attracts us about it. Why do we get hooked on reading this? Because deep down we would love to be her characters or at least we would love to give our lives a shot and wake up a little, they are very vital characters, lively, very impetuous, who live their life because in general women are called on to live everybody's life but their own, and with her [Isabel Allende], her characters live their own lives, especially women.

These words suggest what has already been discussed earlier on in relation to Ang's melodramatic identifications of women viewers in *Dallas*. Allende's female characters seem to offer some women readers the possibility of exploring new subject positions in a safe way and, in turn, in the act of fantasizing with new subjectivities, these women readers may find the answers to negotiate their own personal situations in real life. What is important to note is that by reading Allende and discussing her female characters, women readers in particular are given the opportunity to explore their own subjectivities to ultimately decide if they want to carry on with the struggle that some of Allende's heroines endure in finding a place in a world that traditionally has belonged to men.

On other occasions, some Spanish readers also referred to female characters as 'mágicos' ('magic') (Campanillas, *La casa de los espíritus*) or as those who 'llevan más el espíritu' ('carry the spirit more') (Biblioteca de Marchamalo, *Paula*). The choice of the word 'mágico' I found particularly fascinating. On the one hand, 'magic' or 'mágico' connects to the world of the supernatural, the mysterious and to a certain extent to the spiritual too but on the other hand, it could be understood as somebody possessing a charming quality. In this context, it appears that the sense of 'wonder' and 'fascination' experienced by some British readers discussed earlier on in the chapter also reappears in the Spanish context. This Spanish reader used the word 'mágico' celebrating the spiritual as a female desirable quality and not as a suspicious or odd quality. To fully understand this use of 'mágico' it is important to consider it within the context of the entire reader's comment:

B: Los personajes femeninos los enardece, los llena de una magia, para mí son mágicos los personajes femeninos y luego los masculinos son los que peor trata, simplemente los pone tal y como son (Campanillas, *La casa de los espíritus*).

She [Isabel Allende] enhances female characters, she fills them with magic, for me the female characters are magic and then the male characters are the ones she treats the worst, she simply portrays them just as they are.

It appears that male characters lack this 'magic' quality as they were represented in direct opposition to their female counterparts. 'Tal y como son' ('Just as they are') may refer to their lack of spirituality and as another reader in another group commented, this could be understood as male characters being 'como más carnales' ('connected more to the flesh') (Biblioteca de Marchamalo, *Paula*). In this way, Allende's male characters become part of the mundane and the flesh and far from the spiritual.

This dichotomy that some Spanish readers maintained, is also shared by Mary Garland-Jackson (1994) in her essay 'A Psychological Portrait of Three Female Characters in *La casa de los espíritus*'. In analysing Clara and Esteban's relationship, Garland-Jackson argues that the latter is unable to communicate with his wife because 'he represents the external, material, acquisitive world of conscious reality which is completely differentiated from her internal, immaterial world centred in the unconscious' (1994:63). These comparisons, in a way, seem to perpetuate essentialist images of women's identities as well as men's. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the spiritual and magic should be discarded as they signify for Allende's women in *The House of the Spirits* a space to preserve sanity when the pressures of the patriarchal society where they are inscribed become too strenuous.

The association of female characters with the spiritual also caught the attention of some British readers but with substantial differences when compared to the Spanish comments just seen:

C: Isn't it on the whole that these spirits are working for women only and not for men, I do remember that Nicolás and Jaime, neither of them are involved with the spirits and it's particularly Clara, Blanca and it's Férula, and Férula comes back when she dies, she comes back into the dinning room [...] spirituality becomes materialised. I said that because I felt that it is supporting the women, it bound them together and also supported them, you know, gave them strength; it might have been nutty, you know, it might have been mad, but it's something that they use, I mean something that they thought it's quite normal [...] maybe it's this tradition of women using the spiritual; and in Victorian times in this country, they would have been called hysterical; Victorian society which I suppose is nearer to Latin American society than we are now, I don't know, perhaps I'm exaggerating (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

What is interesting from the above comment is the connection this British reader makes between spirituality, Victorianism and hysteria. Why the Victorian period in particular and not others feature so remarkably in this reader's views? According to the critic Michael Wheeler: 'The Victorian Age was not only the longest but also the greatest in the history of English fiction [...] greatest not only qualitative but also quantitative' (1985:1) and 'for many reasons has influenced and will continue to influence modern and now postmodern culture and society' (Brantlinger and Thesing, 2005:7)⁶¹. In addition to this, the Victorian novel covered a wide spectrum of themes, some of them burning issues at the time such as religion, social class, sexuality, biology or psychology (O'Gorman, 2005). Within the field of psychology⁶², there was an interest in

⁶¹ It is not the purpose of this research to analyse the different factors which have contributed to the pervasive influence of the Victorian fiction to present times. Nonetheless, it would be fair to say that there has been a rebirth of the Victorian novel in the late twentieth century novel, let alone recent film and TV adaptations. (See Anne Humphreys 'The Afterlife of the Victorian Novel: Novel about Novels' and Joss March and Kamilla Elliot 'The Victorian Novel in Film and on Television' in Patrick Brantlinger and William B. Thesing eds., 2005. *A Companion to The Victorian Novel*, pp. 442-477).

⁶² According to Athena Vrettos, the term 'Victorian psychology is potentially misleading, however, insofar as psychology in the nineteenth century was not a coherent discipline, but rather a collection of works by writers who drew upon philosophy, social theory, evolutionary theory, neurology, alienism and psychiatry' but which also included examples from 'creative literature

mental illnesses and hereditary madness (Vrettos, 2005:77). Also, the condition of hysteria became associated with madness and 'as far back as the Middle Ages was thought to be caused by the supernatural' (Bennett, 1998:357). Bennett also argues that:

hysteria is not explicitly foregrounded in *La casa de los espíritus* but, as is apparent in the recent controversial research of Elaine Showalter, hysteria is just one way in which women's psychic conflicts can manifest themselves; magic is Allende's symbolic way of representing this in a positive and non-destructive manner (Bennett, 1998:357-8).

Under these Victorian assumptions, it comes as no surprise that Reader C from Birmingham Group 2 connected the terms women, hysteria, supernatural and Victorian since they all are historically linked. What can also be inferred from this reader's comment is that the spiritual was a mechanism of survival for Allende's women and that only worked for them. This view reinforces essentialising images of women as intuitive and irrational but at the same time and as reader C commented: 'it bound them together and also supported them, you know, gave them strength [...]'. Spirituality in this case could also be read – although this may not be the way reader C interpreted it - as a substitute for the support women receive from a network of family and friends (Bennett, 1998:363). It is when this network fails that a retreat into the magical world can function as an antidote to escape madness as the above reader may have suggested. By reading the spiritual as 'a wild zone to which some women have access when they are marginalised and powerless in society' women become enabled at personal and political levels although the political may not have an impact at the macro level of society as a whole (*ibid*, 359).

for insight into human behaviour, motivation and psychological development, and for examples or case studies of insanity and other abnormal mental conditions' (Vrettos, 2005:69).

Overall, the differences within the Spanish and British cultural traditions, which surround the idea of spirituality, had an impact on how Spanish and British readers respectively negotiated their reading positions around this theme, as shall be seen in detail in chapter seven. Also, the spiritual is explored in more depth when analysing British and Spanish readers' responses to the character of Clara in *The House of the Spirits* in chapter five.

Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the importance British and Spanish readers granted to Allende's characters. It has shown that both British and Spanish readers judged characters' plausibility in terms of credibility, of how genuine and close they felt to "real" people inhabiting the "real" world. Moreover, these readers' understanding of fiction as a mirror of reality inadvertently drew on a series of internalised and conventionalised ideas of what 'common sense' realism is, rather than as pure aesthetics (OUP, 1981).

British and Spanish readers' responses to Allende's characters also underlined the importance of character development as a precondition for credible characters. More important, however, is that ideas about character development also revealed certain assumptions about "literary" value and taste, equating 'rounded' characters to "good" literature and 'flat' characters to "bad" literature.

This chapter also discussed the close relationship between Allende's characters' realistic status and readers' involvement with them. British and Spanish readers' involvement with Allende's characters was mostly situated at an

emotional level (Ang, 1985). Yet, when readers did not feel involved with the characters, they still felt attracted to the possibility of exploring and imagining what it would be like to experience and inhabit the unfamiliar and extra-ordinary world of the characters.

Finally, this chapter stressed the importance granted in particular by the Spanish readers to Allende's central female characterization. Some Spanish responses showed how the author, Isabel Allende, enhanced female characters by employing 'fictionalising strategies' (Ramblado, 2003). Some Spanish readers' comments also highlighted how Allende presented the reader with positive images of women since her heroines' attributes were at times those traditionally associated with the hero's. Moreover, reading Allende's female characters from a feminist perspective, Spanish readers' comments also expressed the value attached to typical feminine attributes such as the spiritual.

Whereas the spiritual was interpreted under a slightly negative light in the British context due to its historical association with hysteria, in the Spanish context, it was nonetheless recovered as a valuable quality for Allende's female characters. This different approach to the spiritual equally suggested how different cultural traditions might impinge on how British and Spanish readers differently negotiated their reading positions around a common theme.

Spanish readers' also stated how Allende's heroines helped them negotiate their own situations in "real" life by fantasizing with new subjectivities offered to them by Allende's female role models. In this way, the 'world of the text' and the 'world of the reader' (Ricoeur, 1988) intersected allowing women readers to make sense of Allende's writings and relate them to their own lives. Moreover, this intersection between the text and readers' worlds suggests, as

already noted in chapter one, that Allende is a “popular” author because her heroines are particularly salient to particular groups of women readers.

Chapter Five

Three Case Studies: Spanish and British Readers' Responses to Esteban Trueba, Clara Del Valle and Eliza Sommers

Introduction

As noted in the previous chapter, Allende's fictional characters are central to British and Spanish readers' discussions. This chapter therefore concentrates on the analysis of British and Spanish readers' responses to specific characters in *The House of the Spirits* and *Daughter of Fortune*.

The selection of characters under analysis is based on readers' attention devoted to them. These are all main characters in both novels except for Colonel Esteban García who despite being a secondary character in *The House of the Spirits* produced a series of allegorical readings in the Leicester Reading Group. As shall be seen British and Spanish readers' discussions concentrate on the characters' behaviour particularly in the case of Esteban Trueba and Colonel Esteban García in *The House of the Spirits*. In addition to this, on the qualities individual characters possessed as in the case of Clara del Valle in *The House of the Spirits* and Eliza Sommers in *Daughter of Fortune*.

Before analysing reader's responses to individual characters, a brief introduction for each of the main characters discussed in this chapter is deemed necessary, especially for those not familiar with either *The House of the Spirits* or *Daughter of Fortune*. This aims at situating each of the characters under discussion in their own narrative context so British and Spanish comments are understood within the character's background and position within the novels. Within the following main characters' descriptions, I make specific references to other secondary characters and their respective relationship to the main characters.

Esteban Trueba's miserable childhood shapes his future life ambitions in *The House of the Spirits*. As a young man, he worked hard in the mine to support his infirm mother and sister Férula, a spinster who had devoted her life to looking after her mother. Also, the money made during his time as a miner offered Esteban the opportunity to climb up the social ladder and become a *terrateniente* (landowner). Esteban finally settled and married Clara del Valle but becoming a family man did not change his abusive behaviour towards the peasant community working in his *hacienda*. Esteban sexually exploits the young peasant women bringing unexpected consequences in his life later on. Alba, Esteban's granddaughter pays for Esteban's mistakes at the hands of his illegitimate son, **Colonel Esteban García** as he tortures and abuses Alba during the period of political turmoil. It is at this point in Trueba's life, when even having fulfilled his political ambitions, he realises that he is not the good husband, father or *terrateniente* he thought he had been. Old and lonely he helps Alba to escape death at the hand of her torturers in a desperate attempt to reconcile himself with his loved ones who have suffered at his expense.

Clara del Valle in *The House of the Spirits* is born into the privileged background of her Chilean bourgeoisie family of *hacendados* and becomes the catalyst for what is to come in the *House*. As a child Clara enjoys telekinetic powers which take her to a world of her own. Her eldest sister's death has an impact on the young Clara who, by mistake, witnesses Rosa's autopsy. This traumatic experience pushes her into a long period of silence which is finally broken when Clara accepts to marry Esteban Trueba who would have married Rosa, if still alive. As a married woman, Clara still inhabits her fantasy world and her general uninterested attitude towards the material and mundane distances her from her husband. Clara forms an intense partnership with her sister-in-law Férula and this slowly turns Trueba into an irate and short tempered man. Despite Esteban's physical and psychological abuse of Clara, she remains loyal to him until her death. Clara's death will leave a vacuum in the del Valle-Trueba family but her spirit will be alive and save her granddaughter Alba from a certain death in prison.

Eliza Sommers in *Daughter of Fortune* is a young and beautiful *mestiza* woman who leaves her adopted English family to begin a great adventure. She decides to abandon her comfortable life in Chile to instead follow her instinct in search of the love of her life. She departs for San Francisco pregnant and madly in love. During her journey, Eliza has the support of Tao Chi'en. Her Chinese friend helps Eliza from the moment she smuggles herself into the ship to the final realisation that she would never find her lover again. Together Eliza and Tao Chi'en surmount many of the difficulties encountered in their journey. For Eliza her great adventure finally turns into a journey of self-discovery.

Esteban Trueba, a Product of His Own Circumstances?

Although Esteban Trueba is not the only male character in *The House of the Spirits*, he is central to the narrative in his role as villain. Nobody gets in Trueba's way and not until the end does he realise that he can lose too. More importantly, he has 'assumed the traditional roles assigned to him by patriarchal society' (De Carvalho, 1994:274) in his position as 'political leader, paternalistic *patrón* of his estate and authoritarian husband and father' (*ibid*). Perhaps, British and Spanish readers' recognition of Trueba's embodiment of patriarchal roles is what initially made them dislike him as can be seen in the words of this man reader: 'El personaje de Esteban, pues es que no me ha gustado mucho francamente, que ¿por qué? Por machista, por tirano [...]' (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('The character of Esteban, frankly I did not like him much, why? Because he's a sexist, a tyrant [...]'). This man reader appears to recognise and reject what Trueba represents but his rejection soon gives way to conciliation since he later adds: '[...] no somos como somos sino que vamos siendo según nos van pasando cosas [...]' ('[...] we are not just the way we are, we become what we are as things happen in our lives [...]'). These words suggest that although this reader may not approve of Esteban's *machista* and despotic attitudes, he is still prepared to make some allowances since Trueba's troubled past seemed to have made him what he is.

Another woman reader in the group supported this view by saying: 'Además la infancia que tuvo, con todas las frustraciones después de la muerte de Rosa, vuelve a casa, se encuentra a su madre más enferma, a su hermana reprochando que no haya estado ahí cuidando [...]' (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('Also [Esteban's] childhood, full of frustrations after

Rosa's death, he goes back home, he finds his mother more sick, his sister reproaching him for not having been there looking after [...]') and among the British groups: 'And Rosa's death affected Esteban and Clara and I think that if she hadn't died, everything would have been different [...]' (Reader D, Bingham Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*). Similarly, having lived through difficult times is accepted at face value to excuse Trueba as this woman reader said: 'Yo no considero que él [Esteban Trueba] sea tan malo, es una época en la que vive pero no es malo' (Campanillas, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('I don't think that he's [Esteban Trueba] all that bad, it is the time he lives in, but he is not a bad person'). Besides, even when Esteban is able to increase his wealth and power as *terrateniente* in *Las Tres Marías* [Esteban's *hacienda*] by using exploitative methods with his workers, he is still justified by another woman reader in the Fontanar group when saying:

Él está en la tierra, y para poder ganarse la vida si hubiera ido de blando, dando dinero, no hubiera tenido lo que ha tenido, y sería el pobre que está cavando la tierra y sin embargo no es, cuando se fue a la mina, mira lo que trabajaba y eso sí que se lo estuvo currando hasta que se vio con un poco de dinero, ¿que pasó entonces? Pues lo mismo que está pasando ahora, en vez de trabajarlo tú, que te lo trabaje otro, seas más o menos tirano, de acuerdo es un tirano, yo es que al final lo justifico de esa manera y digo bueno, *Las Tres Marías*, mira lo que hizo con *Las Tres Marías* y para tener el dinero que tenían y la verdad es que él trabajar no trabajaba, o sea que tenía que sacarlo de algún sitio, que no es el ideal de justicia que tenemos pero estaba interpretando un papel, y el papel era el de terrateniente.

He [Esteban] is on the land and in order to make a living if he had been soft, giving money away, he would not have had everything he had and he would be the poor peasant digging the land and he is not; when he went to the mine, look how hard he worked, he worked until he had a bit of money, what happened then? Exactly what happens now, instead of you doing the work, let another person do the job, being more or less a tyrant, I agree he [Esteban] is a tyrant, in the end I justify him in this way and say ok, Las Tres Marías, look at what he did with Las Tres Marías and to have the money they had and the truth is that he [Esteban]

didn't actually work so he had to get it from somewhere and this is not our ideal of justice but he was playing a role and his role was that of a landowner.

According to the reader above, Trueba could not have been anything else but authoritarian, otherwise he would not have improved his status. Though this idea of self-improvement may be valuable in its own right, in Trueba's context however, it simply aids to sustain the bourgeois and capitalist values he represents. This reader's comments therefore are reproducing the patriarchal discourses based on the ownership of land and accumulation of wealth, which serve to maintain the dominance of the upper classes – *terratenientes* in the context of *The House of the Spirits* - over the lower classes – Trueba's workers (Swanson, 1994). Furthermore, this reader regards the process as "natural" and cyclical since 'the same is happening nowadays'. For this reader history repeats itself as those with power will exploit those without it. In this sense, this woman reader is endorsing Trueba's masculine interpretation of the world, a world situated in Cixous' terms in the 'Realm of the Proper' (Swanson, 1994:225) and where ambitions revolve around 'property, self-projection and hierarchy' (*ibid*). In this respect, what is at issue here, is that not only Trueba's workers but also his family members - who happen to be mostly women⁶³ - belong to the marginalised groups which are essential to maintain the dominant masculinist capitalist order embodied in the figure of Trueba. Some men readers seem to endorse this order by saying: 'He [Trueba] had very strong family feelings, didn't he? The family was important and look how devastated he was when Clara walked out, he never accepted it' (Reader C, Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The*

⁶³ Jaime and Nicolás are the only two Trueba's male offspring. However, as Philip Swanson observes in his article 'Tyrants and Trash: Sex, Class and Culture in *La casa de los espíritus*', both are 'marginal' and 'anti-stereotypical' representing 'a plea for the slackening of those rigid class and gender roles' (Swanson, 1994: 227-228).

House of the Spirits). This view, nonetheless, encountered some opposition among other group members since another woman reader in the same group replied to the above firmly in these terms: 'It was about power, not about a relationship' (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*). What these woman's words seem to argue, is that the importance given by Trueba to his family is directly proportional to maintaining Trueba's power and order. The more controlled he felt his family was, the more power he would gain. Ownership was therefore not only restricted to Trueba's land, but also, to his family. More importantly, some women readers were not willing to turn a blind eye to this since the 'devastation' Trueba felt, had to do with his inability to own Clara 'as a sort of cattle, as a kind of consumer good to be purchased or as something to be possessed totally' (Swanson, 1994: 220).

Similarly, some Spanish women readers appeared to have also supported this patriarchal discourse based on power and marginalisation by unconditionally defending Trueba:

Vamos ya sabéis que he estado desde el principio a favor de Esteban Trueba con todas sus bestialidades que no las comparto ni mucho menos pero que es una persona que la veo coherente y con todo su salvajismo y eso no lo puedo compartir; él se enamoró, se casó, aguantó a su mujer todo lo que tenía que aguantar, realmente llegó a una hacienda que estaba tirada, los obreros estaban muertos de hambre, estaba en una época que también hay que ponerse en situación, él arregló todo aquello, dio muchísimo trabajo, claro las cosas tampoco se consiguen en un mes [...]
(Biblioteca de Guadalajara, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I mean, you already know that I have been in favour of Esteban Trueba from the beginning, with all his barbarism which I do not share, far from it, but he is a person who I see as coherent and with all his savagery that I cannot share; he fell in love, he married and put up with all he had to coming from his wife, he really arrived at a hacienda that was totally abandoned, the workers were half-starved, he was living at a time that you also have to imagine yourself in, he fixed everything, gave a lot of work to people, not everything can be achieved in a month [...]

The above woman reader does not condone Trueba's paternalistic attitudes towards his workers. She seems to partake in Trueba's patriarchal discourse since she may believe that this is the way things should be, it is the "natural" order of things. Perhaps it is her inability to deconstruct the "natural" order that makes her an unconscious accomplice of it, or as Philip Swanson claims by referring to Toril Moi's seminal work *Sexual Textual Politics*, that this kind of responses make sense within the patriarchal mechanisms of survival. These create 'an illusion of a unified individual and collective self, a given universal world order in which male, white, middle-class, heterosexual experience passes itself off as "nature"' (Moi in Swanson, 1994: 219). Moreover, from a class and gender perspective, not only women but also the working classes become one large marginalised group whose aim is to sustain the process of reproduction in capitalist societies (*ibid*). This marginalisation is what British and Spanish readers seem to be perpetuating at least at the fictional level when they are excusing characters like Esteban Trueba.

A further characteristic of patriarchy – also suggested in Swanson's (1994) work - is its relationship with concepts of civilisation and barbarism. In this respect, Leicester reader C commented on how Trueba saw himself as the embodiment of civilisation in the barbaric Latin American countryside: 'Esteban is always there, he's there in the coup, and he thinks he's a source of civilisation' (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*). This man reader appears to take on a critical stance on Esteban's own self-identity as bearer of the civilised world by using the words '*he thinks he is*' – my emphasis – a source of civilisation. These words precisely highlight that Trueba is in fact representing the opposite to civilisation and although these reader's words are not explicit in

naming Trueba's uncivilised actions, one may think of the episode where he rapes Pancha García. This is as a prime example of his barbaric rather than civilised conduct.

To understand this reader distancing herself from Trueba's barbarism, it is also necessary to recall Carroll's cognitive approach employed in chapter four when discussing readers' involvement with characters. In addition to the already identified different 'alignment' processes, it is equally important to consider Carroll's notion of the 'moral quality of characters' (Carroll, 1996) which serves as a framework in defining British as well as Spanish readers' relationship with Trueba. In the context of suspense films, Carroll claims that 'the protagonists will be regarded as right in the moral system of the film provided they are presented as possessing some virtues' (Carroll in Hallam and Marshment, 2000:137). One of the ways in which 'virtue' is understood among characters is by their 'protectiveness of the weak' that is 'characters who are in some sense protagonist's inferiors, but whom the protagonist treats with consideration' (Carroll, 1996:105). It is therefore not surprising that Trueba's paternalistic attitude towards his workers – and by and large to the women in *The House of the Spirits* - could be read under a positive prism since what may be regarded as exploitative and marginalising practices could also be interpreted as caring for the more disadvantaged in society. Not only this, Trueba's atrocious behaviour is forgiven because within the text parameters he is morally right to behave in the way he does because 'estaba interpretando un papel, y el papel era el de terrateniente' (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('[he] was playing a role, and his role was that of a landowner'). A way of making sense of these words is by situating Trueba's role within what is generally accepted as the

characteristics of a *terrateniente* outside fiction. This is why another Spanish reader said: '[...] es una persona coherente' ('[...] he is a coherent person') or as the Librarian in Fontanar said: '[...] es un hombre de su tiempo [...]' ('[...] he is a man of his time [...]'). The coherence these readers may be referring to is dependant on an accurate representation of Trueba's actions and psychological motivations within the very specific historical framework he inhabits in his role as *terrateniente*. This is why Trueba's ruthless behaviour is accepted by readers on a moral basis inside the fictional world of *The House of the Spirits* but perhaps not outside it.

On the other hand, what some Spanish readers seem to regard as credible has a different outcome for some British readers. For example, Leicester reader B when talking about Trueba, refers to 'a credibility gap' since he could not comprehend Trueba's obliviousness about the impact his brutality could have on his family:

B: I just found out that there's a credibility gap indeed between a man who thinks nothing of going and beating the shit out of the average peasant political views and he can't see that danger to his own family members when people like him in society will beat the shit out of his own family (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

Similarly, another man reader in the same group referred to this 'the credibility gap' by saying:

A: [...] things like I couldn't understand like how he could shout and rage all day and expect to make love to Clara in the evening. There's a gulf between his perception and what marriage is [...] (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

In both instances, what seems to be shattering Trueba's credibility is his violent behaviour. The critic Teresa Huerta (1990) in her article 'La ambivalencia de la violencia y el horror en *La casa de los espíritus* de Isabel Allende' analyses the

role violence occupies in Allende's narrative. Huerta claims that the use of violence and terror could lead to ambivalent reactions on behalf of potential Allende's readers⁶⁴. According to Huerta, violence and terror could fulfil contemporary readers' expectations of Latin American fiction since it is believed to represent an incredible reality, 'una realidad increíble y alucinante que escapa a los límites de lo plausible' ('an incredible and amazing reality which escapes the limits of plausibility') with earthquakes, illnesses, death, assassination, political terror and so forth (Huerta, 1990:57). On the other hand, violence and terror could produce a 'cathartic-ironic identification' between anti-hero and reader whose function is to 'cause the destruction of reader's illusion to inspire aesthetic and moral reflections' (*ibid*, 59). Huerta claims that Trueba is the anti-hero that the reader rejects as he becomes the personification of violence. What interests me from Huerta's argument, is also the connection she establishes between Trueba and the class he represents by arguing that the escalation of violence at the end of the novel is the consequence of economic and class interests. If violence is used to sustain class dominance, this has also gender implications. Men appear to use violence not only to assert masculinity but also because they feel justified by an 'ideology of supremacy' (Connell, 1995:83). This 'ideology of supremacy' excuses their physical and verbal abuse of women (*ibid*).

By distancing themselves from Trueba's violence, the above Leicester man readers may also be distancing themselves from what he inherently represents, a man who constantly needs to assert his masculinity and power by means of violence and aggression. But there is more to it, this interest in

⁶⁴ Contrary to this research, no ethnographic work with Allende's readers formed the basis of Huerta's claims on readers' relationship with violence in Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. Huerta's interpretations are based on theories of hermeneutics.

Trueba's brutal behaviour may be symptomatic of what these readers may want to deny in themselves, a denial which makes them morally superior since Trueba's Latin American version of violence is not part of their westernised masculine worlds.

Moreover, these Leicester readers' 'denied violence' (Horrocks, 1994: 135) is what may be 'blinding them to their own violence' (*ibid*). These readers may inadvertently be projecting their own violence onto men such as Trueba since it may feel safer to unconsciously 'act out their own violence' (*ibid*) at a fictional level as in this way it would not bear any consequences in the "real" world.

The distancing of the above two men British readers are not exclusive since one of the male readers from Fontanar also positioned himself away from Trueba by saying: 'yo no tengo ningún valor común con él [...]' (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('I don't share any values with him [Esteban] [...]'). Interestingly, he later on praised Trueba since he was a 'changed' person at the end of his life: '[...] pues que ha sido un hombre que ha tenido la posibilidad de aceptar cambiar, y al final cuando ya se ha visto solo hasta cambia' ('[...] he has been a man who had the capacity to accept change and at the end when he finds himself alone he even changes'). This idea of change could be interpreted as this reader wanting to grant Trueba a second chance. The idea of repentance, forgiveness and change forms part of many Biblical texts that impregnate Catholic and by and large Christian traditions. Repentance appears to be a precondition to seek change and ultimately forgiveness and a second chance. What this man reader seems to ignore is that Trueba did not fully repent since as another woman reader observed: '[...] él ya está redimido porque él se

siente que lo ha hecho bien, porque cuando le decían que trataba mal a los obreros, él creía que los trataba fenomenal [...]’ (Biblioteca de Guadalajara, *La casa de los espíritus*) ([...] he [Trueba] has already redeemed himself because he feels that he has done things right, because when he was told he treated his workers badly, he believed that he was treating them fantastically [...]). For this reason it seems to be more accurate to refer to Esteban’s repentance as the result of ‘a metaphorical emasculation’ when he realises that there is no space for him under the new ruling order (De Carvalho, 1994: 274-275). In the words of Leicester reader C: ‘I think there’s a powerful moment in the book when Esteban actually comes to the realisation that his own political allies are actually not’ (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*). This ‘metaphorical emasculation’ is according to De Carvalho part of a longer journey into acceptance and love, both part of Cixous’ feminine libidinal economy. By refusing to become part of this libidinal economy and clinging to typical masculine attributes like reason, Trueba won’t be able to redeem himself as man reader C from Birmingham Reading Group 2 points out: ‘One of the problems with Esteban was that he was always trying to make sense [...] while he was trying to make sense of everything, he actually did himself a bad turn in a way, you don’t always make sense of life, life can come up and hit you in the face’. This reader’s view questions the logic of Trueba’s masculine world. His success seems to depend on sharing the more fluid and less rational world that Clara inhabits. For this reason, the only man reader from Nottingham Library talks about Trueba in these terms: ‘Esteban who seems to be the typical macho Latin male, also had a weak side’ or as this Spanish woman librarian describes it:

Tiene esa parte de ternura el personaje que es lo que decíamos, es como si nos redimiera al personaje, nos lo redime de todas las

barbaridades que ha hecho, de la tiranía, de la dictadura que él ha impuesto a su propia familia pero es como si la propia historia se hubiera puesto de acuerdo para que él mismo se hubiera espantado de lo que él mismo ha provocado, y la ternura de la nieta y las condiciones históricas redimieran al personaje, eso también es muy bonito (Biblioteca de Guadalajara, *La casa de los espíritus*).

The character [Trueba] has his tender side, that is what we've been discussing, it's as though she'd [Allende] redeemed the character, he's redeemed from all the atrocities he's done, from his tyranny, from the dictatorial rule he's imposed on his own family but it's as though history itself had conspired to make him feel shocked at what he himself has brought about, and his granddaughter's tenderness and the historical circumstances seem to redeem the character, that is really nice.

For the above two readers, Trueba's 'weak side' or 'ternura' ('tender side') possibly meant being closer to the feminine, as according to Linda Gould Levine in her 'Passage to Androgyny': 'Esteban is gradually "Clarified" [...] At the moment of his death, he is literally (and figuratively) the same size as she is, a symbol of his shrinking as a man and his entrance into the zone of androgyny' (1990:170). This androgynous zone represents an area of reconciliation where gender stereotypes become obliterated. But more important is that, by entering the androgynous zone, men and women readers felt that Esteban had a chance of survival. Moreover, according to another female Spanish reader the androgynous zone works because 'Además mezclar Esteban Trueba con ella, Clara, que digamos son totalmente opuestos y sin embargo pues están ahí, que se complementan, incluso que se quieren' (Biblioteca de Guadalajara, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('Besides to mix Esteban Trueba and her, Clara, who let's say are completely the opposite of each other but nevertheless there they are, that complement each other, they even love each other').

Nonetheless, Allende's feminisation of Trueba did not always succeed. There was one woman reader from the Guadalajara reading group who was not

willing to redeem Trueba for his wrong doings. Trueba became the only one to blame since the end of the novel revealed that his family had suffered the consequences of his wicked actions: ‘Al final, si te das cuenta, todos pagan por Esteban Trueba, porque es todo una venganza contra él, y paga toda la familia, pero el culpable es Esteban Trueba’ (Biblioteca de Guadalajara, *La casa de los espíritus*) (‘At the end, if you think about it, everybody pays for Esteban Trueba because it is all revenge against him; and all the family pays, but the guilty one is Esteban Trueba’). This reader’s refusal to exonerate Trueba may be a call for not exonerating those who abuse power outside the fictional world of *The House of the Spirits*. By rejecting Trueba’s patriarchal world, this reader is in turn refusing to endorse the patriarchal rules imposed in society and which maintain the marginalisation of women.

Esteban García and Trueba’s Allegorical Readings

Discussions on Colonel Esteban García, Trueba’s illegitimate son, mostly emerged among British men readers. As was discussed earlier on, Esteban Trueba’s violence acted as a distancing mechanism especially among the Leicester readers. Similarly, distancing occurred with the character of Colonel Esteban García and this was possible through the allegorical readings that readers produced.

Some of the Leicester readers in dealing with a character like García, being the epitome of violence, appeared to have blocked the normal mechanisms employed to read him mimetically. This may have happened in this way not because these readers could not find a referent in the “real” world to compare

García to, but because employing an allegorical reading felt a safer strategy for distancing themselves from the character, so there would be fewer chances for these readers to find themselves associated with the violence García represented. Allegorically, reader B from the Leicester group expressed what he thought was García's purpose in the novel:

B: The danger is that Esteban García represents the cutting edge of Pinochet shock troops, who got no moral reasons not to torture people [...] I know why she [Allende] introduced him at that point, I can understand the trouble is that he becomes a representative of a group of people who I think she's [Allende] almost saying have been cheated out (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

Reader B identified Esteban García with the more radicalised wing of the military. This reader's reading coincides with what several critics have also interpreted in the figure of Esteban Trueba. For example, by examining the allegorical capacity of *La casa de los espíritus*, Ramblado (2003) claims that Esteban Trueba's dominance and violence could be identified with the rule of the dictator as both become 'immune from the law' since both 'make the law' (2003:56). Although Ramblado does not make specific references to the allegorical readings of García in her work, it could be argued that textual elements that triggered the allegorical in Trueba could be transferred to the Colonel, as seen by the above reader's interpretation.

In addition, Leicester readers not only produced allegorical readings of Esteban García, but also of Esteban Trueba:

D: Do you think Esteban [Trueba] represents Chile? Represents a tradition?

B: Represents traditional structures in society. I think that when you could look at individual instances in the book, the one in my mind when the earthquake happens, the great earthquake and the house falls on Esteban's head and basically every bone in his body is broken and the old guy comes with this mysterious magic,

somehow he heals him, surely that is allegorical if you see Esteban as potentially representative of Chile, you know that is the way the earthquake functions. It doesn't make medical sense.

The above reader interpreted Trueba's broken bones as the shattering of traditional structures in society. What this reader's interpretation also implicitly suggests is that, the old guy, Pedro García who represented the barbarism that Trueba wanted to eradicate, is who paradoxically saved the civilised world of Trueba and not the other way round. Besides, the fact that the women in Trueba's family mixed with the disadvantaged and indigenous workers in *Las Tres Marías*, reinforces the idea that barbarism 'is nothing more than the exuberance of a true Latin-American condition which should not be distorted by alien values' (Swanson, 1994:224). Swanson's alien values could be understood as the opposite of marginal groups –women and workers – that is, the dominant, the civilised groups – Trueba and the military.

What I found remarkable is that these allegorical interpretations only occurred within the men only British reading group who took part in this research. It seemed that comparatively speaking, this group was anxious about underperforming in front of the academic researcher. They had to demonstrate that their meetings were something valuable and intellectually stimulating. This group of readers may have sought to demonstrate that they could read discerningly as "literary" critics do. This was achieved by producing a more sophisticated reading with the use of allegory. Nonetheless, claiming that men only reading groups may have a tendency to present themselves as more scholarly rigorous and serious in their discussions than other women or mixed groups should be cautiously extrapolated to other groups outside this research context.

Clara Del Valle: “Real” Versus “Magic”

Clara del Valle became the most discussed female character in *The House of the Spirits* among Spanish, and to a lesser extent, British readers. Both British and Spanish readers identified Clara as central to the narrative by saying: ‘She’s the bulk of the story, she’s very much the central figure’ (Leicester Reading Group, *House of the Spirits*); ‘[...] yo diría que el libro está basado en ella pero bueno, entre ella y el marido pero ella tiene mucho que hacer, empieza el libro con ella y Esteban llega después, para mí ha sido el alma de la historia’ (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*) (‘[...] I would say that the book is based on her, well, between her and her husband but she’s got a lot to do, the book starts with her and Esteban arrives later, for me she has been the soul of the story’).

The centrality British and Spanish readers refer to, has also been maintained by several critics of Allende’s work. Michael Handelsman, for example, defines Clara’s prominent role in similar terms to British and Spanish readers: ‘Es imprescindible señalar la centralidad de la figura de Clara quien logra desplazar al patriarca, Esteban’ (1988:60) (‘It is indispensable to emphasise the centrality of the character of Clara who manages to displace the patriarch, Esteban’). Handelsman’s reference to the displacement of the patriarchal discourse, although as already noted in the introduction, has been the focus of much of Allende criticism in *The House of the Spirits*, was nonetheless initially overlooked by British and Spanish readers. Although these readers had identified Clara as the main narrative force, the attention placed on the character was the result of her unconventional representation. On the one hand, she is this

ethereal being whose contact with the mundane seemed scarce and at times non-existent, but on the other hand, she is able to transform herself into a capable and strong woman fighting for survival in difficult circumstances. Paradoxically, Clara's unconventionality is what challenges and subverts Trueba's patriarchal discourse although some British and Spanish readers may not have interpreted it in those terms.

What was exceptional about Clara was her relationship with the 'preternatural world' (Bennett, 1998: 357)⁶⁵ or 'the airy fairy' as some readers referred to (Lincoln Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*). Initial reactions to Clara's connection to the 'preternatural world' made some British and Spanish women readers feel unsure about their involvement with the character: 'When I started, was it Clara? Oh!! I thought, emm ... I'm not sure if I'm going to like her or not, with all this thing about the spirits, I don't know' (Bingham Book Group, *The House of the Spirits*) or 'No es que me caiga bien ni mal pero yo no la entiendo, es una persona que vive completamente en el limbo' (Biblioteca de Guadalajara 2, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('It is not that I like her or dislike her but I don't understand her, she is somebody who lives completely in limbo'). Clara's spirituality is therefore perceived as a negative quality for some readers. But more than the spiritual it is Clara's deconstruction of the patriarchal model which exacerbates her unconventional role. According to Amaya and Fernández (1989), Clara's deconstruction of the patriarchal model occurs because: 'no atiende su casa, no es madre en el sentido tradicional, no es abnegada, no tiene los pies en la tierra [...] es irreverente con los ritos religiosos, se comunica con

⁶⁵ Caroline Bennett in her article 'The Other and the Other-Worldly: The Function of Magic in Isabel Allende's *La casa de los espíritus*' uses the term 'preternatural' which she claims is better than the term 'supernatural' which, although similar in meaning, has through its usage become heavily loaded with connotations of vampires and evil which are inappropriate to the magical realist writing' (Bennett, 1998:364)

los espíritus y lee el Tarot' (Amaya y Fernández, 1989: 192) ('[Clara] does not look after her home, she is not a mother in the traditional sense, she's not self-denying, she does not have her feet on the ground [...] she is flippant with religious ceremonies, she communicates with spirits and she reads the Tarot'). These are some of Clara's unusual qualities, some of which are particularly problematic for some of the British and Spanish women readers:

A: Clara was a particularly odd mother, I mean, to allow her sons to go to boarding school, she didn't really know them (Bingham Book Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

Clara a mí no me gusta porque me ha parecido muy egoísta, yo he pensado mucho en ella y de hecho cuando le viene la menstruación a la hija, que se entera más de seis meses más tarde, ella con sus espíritus; siempre está pensando en sí misma, nunca ha pensado en nadie más que en ella misma (Biblioteca de Guadalajara, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I don't like Clara because she seems to me very selfish, I have been thinking a lot about her and when her daughter has her first period, she [Clara] finds out six months later, she is with her spirits; she's always thinking about herself, she's never thought about anybody but herself.

Responding to the comment above, another woman reader from the Guadalajara group says:

Pero la relación que tiene con su hija es muy buena, tal vez a nivel material no está al tanto de todos los detalles diarios de una vida normal y corriente, pero sin embargo luego se comunica con su hija perfectamente, no sé tiene un algo especial con ella; la comunicación que tiene con su hija es algo espiritual, no es algo material, espiritualmente está en contacto con ellos, los hijos, los quiere, les da ese apoyo (Biblioteca de Guadalajara, *La casa de los espíritus*).

But the relationship she's got with her daughter is very good, perhaps on a material level, she [Clara] does not keep up with the daily details of an ordinary routine but still afterwards, she communicates with her daughter perfectly, I don't know, she's got something special with her; the communication she's got with her daughter is something spiritual, not material, spiritually she's in contact with them, she loves them, she gives them that support.

Yo creo que ella da la imagen de que está en otro mundo pero luego conoce muy bien a sus hijos y de hecho cuando la hija tiene novio ella lo controla (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I think that she [Clara] gives the image that she's in another world but she knows her children very well and in fact when her daughter has a boyfriend, she controls the situation.

In the first two comments above, Clara's mothering is considered inadequate. Both readers claim that Clara is this egotistical, 'odd' being who only thinks about herself and does not know who her offspring are. Janice Radway in her analysis of Nancy Chodorow's thesis *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) explains that a good wife and mother's duty is to serve individual family members' psychological needs and in doing so they also serve themselves as women, as if women would not be expected to be 'reproduced' and supported by anybody (Radway, 1984:94). Further on, Radway argues that the lack of emotional nurturance that her romance readers experience is delivered by the same act of reading despite the content of the romance. In the context of *The House of the Spirits*, Radway's claims could be understood in terms of Clara's finding her own nurturance by losing herself in the world of the spirits, as a way of 'suspending temporarily those familial relationships and to throw up a screen between *herself* (my emphasis) and the arena where *she* (my emphasis) is required to do most of *her* (my emphasis) relating to others' (*ibid*, 92). This retreat to the world of the spirits as a way of escaping her duties as a mother and wife appears to be unacceptable for some the above Spanish readers mainly because Clara does not fit into the mother-sacrifice role expected from her. This spirit of sacrifice where women are destined to live other people's lives but their own appears to be deep rooted in women's psyche, especially in Catholic

traditions where the Virgin Mary has always been a role model and has dictated the rules by which virtuous and good women should live.

Conversely, in the second and third comments, readers seem to accept the type of relationship Clara has with her daughter Blanca. This mother-daughter relationship in Allende is based on what Gómez-Parham identified as 'literature of matrilineage'. According to Gómez-Parham (1988), Clara's role as mother is of great importance because she is a transmitter of values to resist 'Esteban's feudal politics' (1988:198). Although the above readers do not refer to Clara-Blanca's relationship in Gómez-Parham terms, they identify the special nature of their relationship recognising that the spiritual forms part of the communion between mother and daughter. This special spiritual communication and relationship is possible because the mother-daughter bond is based on a 'yonic cycle which involves interchangeability and the flowing of female fluid, essence of female creativity' (Ramblado, 2003:139). According to Ramblado, the female fluid refers to innate characteristics of women which are transmitted before birth and incorporated at the moment of death, like a form of energy that 'is never created or destroyed, only transformed' (*ibid*,142). In Allende, this female fluid is represented as 'the inherited imagination, the exclusive bond between mothers, daughters and granddaughters' (*ibid*, 141). Thus, when the above woman reader referred to the spiritual support Clara offered to her daughter, she may have been referring to the same concepts as protection and transmission of values that both Gómez- Parham and Ramblado use to explain the mother-daughter bond in Allende's work.

Similarly, in her relationship with Esteban and in her duties as wife, Clara appears to fail according to the following Spanish readers who believe that: 'Y

cuando se casa pues es una persona como tú has dicho, muy poco comprometida, ella está a su bola, en esos sueños, en esa nube y no está en la realidad' (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la fortuna*) ('And when she [Clara] gets married, she is a person, as you already mentioned, not very committed, she does her own thing, in those dreams, up in the clouds and not in reality') or '[...] no lucha porque las cosas cambien sino que las acepta como son y ella está por encima de ellas' (Biblioteca de Azuqueca, *Hija de la fortuna*) ('[...] she [Clara] does not fight to change things but she accepts them as they are and she is above them'). These comments emphasise once more Clara's eccentricity as problematic because it prevents Clara from fulfilling her role as dutiful wife. A further implication is that Clara appears to be this passive creature who does not belong in the "real" world where "real" battles are fought. Perhaps, what these readers do not seem to realise is that Clara's spiritual dimension is giving her the independence and autonomy she needs as a woman to survive in a man's world. Clara's idea of survival starts in the private sphere by asserting her own individualism. At a private level, Clara offers passive resistance but her clandestine work with Trueba's workers in *Las Tres Marías* suggests that the private/personal becomes public/political. Once Clara's spirituality is understood in this way, it could be suggested that British and Spanish readings are somehow limited in this respect. On the whole, readers have been blinded by Clara's 'preternatural world' which created tensions that some readers resolved by simply engaging with the spiritual and 'magic' in negative terms, unable to perceive the political possibilities that these could also offer. As Caroline Bennett claims, 'magic' for Clara acts as 'the support network [...] she has a psychological release from the oppression of her macho husband and wider

patriarchal society [...]’ (Bennett, 1998:363). This ‘support network’ Bennett refers to, can take several forms since for Radway’s romance readers, belonging to the romance reading community, acted as a substitute for family or neighbour support networks. Perhaps Clara’s ‘magic’ support network is exceptional in today’s women’s communities and this is what makes it difficult for British and Spanish women readers to engage with it.

Nonetheless, not all British and Spanish readers responded negatively to Clara. Some comments praised Clara’s determination and individualism to stand up against patriarchal rule:

Ella [Clara] metida en su mundo, flotando con su gente, con sus artistas, no se preocupa de nada más, lo que he dicho antes, llega el momento en que se la necesita y ahí está ella, y se impone, es un personaje fantástico (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

She [Clara] inhabiting her own world, floating with her own people, with her artists, she doesn’t worry about anything else, as I said before, the minute that she’s needed, there she is, she imposes herself, she’s a fantastic character.

A: It worked for me, I think that people are incredibly capable of changing and adapt to different kind of responses, at times she [Clara] swaps her real world for her magical and I think that’s quite liberating (Nottingham Library, *The House of the Spirits*).

Y a ella se le puede disculpar todo porque en realidad ella no hace daño a nadie, ella es así, y cuando tiene que ponerse a hacer algo importante lo hace, cuando se la necesita de verdad (Biblioteca de Guadalajara, *La casa de los espíritus*).

And you can forgive her because in fact she doesn’t do anybody any harm, that is the way she is, and when she has to do something important, she does it, when she is really needed.

Ella [Clara] hace lo que quiere y cuando pasa algo grave, cuando se tiene que enfrentar con el marido, cuando le da la bofetada, ella se enfrenta a la realidad (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

She [Clara] does what she wants and when something serious happens, when she has to confront her husband, when he hits her, she confronts that reality.

Ella [Clara] te da una personalidad super fuerte porque ella sigue con sus criterios pase lo que pase; se ha casado con un señor que tela marinera y que sin embargo lo lleva fenomenal y le quiere siempre (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

She [Clara] shows you a super personality because she follows her criteria no matter what happens; she's married to a very difficult man and in spite of this, she copes fantastically well and always loves him.

Bibliotecaria: Me ha encantado Clara por todas las cosas que habéis dicho y de que tiene una personalidad fuerte que creo que sí, a parte de que Esteban tiene un carácter fuerte pero ella es la que se planta con lo que se tenga que plantar y no la apea del burro nadie (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

Librarian [woman]: I loved Clara for all the things you've mentioned and that she's got a strong personality that I believe she does, apart from Esteban has a strong temperament but she is the one who makes a stand when she has to make a stand and no one is able to change her mind.

These readers' comments completely challenge the idea of Clara's passivity; on the contrary, she becomes this pro-active character, ready to step in when circumstances required. Clara is no longer seen just as a passive individual who exclusively inhabits a world of fantasy. The use of the adjective 'fantástico' ('fantastic') was quite revealing and although it may be unclear what it was referring to - either Clara's spiritual qualities or her active role in difficult circumstances – the choice of 'fantástico' transmitted positiveness about the character.

In her relationship to Trueba, some women readers admired Clara because she offered a rather unique and 'liberating' means to fight oppression. Clara may be acting in an apparent submissive and voiceless way, but as the above readers pointed out, 'sigue con sus criterios pase lo que pase' ('she follows

her criteria no matter happens’) and ‘se planta con lo que se tiene que plantar’ (‘she makes a stand when she has to make a stand’). On the surface, Clara seemed to have been subjugated to Trueba by remaining loyal and married to him but she was able to subvert him by clinging to her spirituality enabling her to decide when and how she would comply with the imposed traditional feminine roles.

Perhaps the comment of one of Fontanar’s woman readers can encapsulate at its best how Clara’s duality should be understood. This comment refers to the episode when Clara defends Blanca’s relationship with Pedro Tercero and gets hit by Trueba for protecting Blanca. In response to Trueba’s brutality, Clara will retreat into silence, since: ‘[...] en la convivencia ella nos da una lección y es que ella no suelta charlas, que las charlas no sirven para convencer, por ejemplo cuando deja de hablar a su marido, yo creo que es de valorar’ (‘[...] on relationships, she [Clara] teaches us a lesson and that is she does not lecture, lectures are no good, they don’t convince people, for example when she stops talking to her husband, I think that has to be valued’) (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*). On the one hand, Clara’s silence could be interpreted as a sign of a passive attitude but on the other, through silence she is rejecting Trueba’s control as well as showing solidarity with her daughter’s cause. Clara’s unconventional mechanisms of resistance may appear to readers contradictory at times. They seem to be confronted by a character who is actively challenging Trueba by telling him about his double standards but, who at the same time, fights back from a rather passive position in a world far from reality. What this last reader was also capable of seeing was that this apparent passivity is also empowering at least in the private sphere. Or as Mary Garland-

Jackson (1994) claims: 'Clara clearly reveals her power to act in accordance with her own spirituality instead of submitting to her husband's authority' (1994:62).

Nevertheless, this positive reading of Clara's spirituality has also some downfalls:

Ya después de todo lo que habéis dicho, a Clara se la podría resumir con el "vive y deja vivir" porque no se impone, tampoco nunca ha arriesgado nada, entonces lo que ha tenido, ella ha decidido pero tampoco ha ido a por algo, nunca se ha arriesgado, cuando se fue Férula, ahí ella tampoco se rebeló, le dejó de hablar, es decir, toma postura pero no es capaz de modificar lo que hay, es el "vive y deja vivir" (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

After all you've said, Clara could be summed up as "live and let live" because she does not impose herself, she has never risked anything either, so what she's got, she's decided but she's never gone after anything, she's never taken a risk, when Férula goes, she does not fight back, she stopped talking to him, she takes a stand but she's not able to change what she's got, it's "live and let live".

These words underline Clara's mechanisms of resistance as conservative. Conservative since not only do they discourage change within the domestic microcosm, but they also become ineffective in implementing change in the public sphere. Since Clara does not leave Trueba when he abuses her physically, she is not advocating for new feminine models to challenge tradition to its limits. Clara is not prepared to abandon the comforts of her bourgeois life; she is not risking her current status quo by subverting patriarchy from a personal standpoint. In contrast, her granddaughter Alba will risk everything, even her life, to achieve political and social change. However, as another woman reader from Fontanar suggested: 'Si no hubiera sido por ella [Clara], la nieta se hubiera muerto, si no llega a ser por ella que se le aparece y le dice que escriba' (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('If it hadn't been for her [Clara], her granddaughter would have died, if it hadn't been for her who appears

and tells her [Alba] to write'). According to this reader, Alba survives her ordeal by listening to her grandmother's spirit who urges Alba to expiate her prison horrors through writing.

Overall, Clara may not represent a transgressive feminine model but her peculiar means of fighting the system is still necessary in developing new models such as Alba. More importantly, Clara's attitude and determination were valued and regarded positively not only among women readers but also among one of the man readers in the Fontanar group:

Pero a mí lo que más me gusta es que vive la vida que ella quiere, cuando decide que quiere estar con la cotidianidad de una casa está, pero porque ella lo decide, en contraste con Férula, o con otras, y cuando decide estar en su mundo, en su magia está, pero ella decide, no la vida la decide a ella, eso me gusta de ella (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

But what I like most is that she [Clara] lives the life she wants, when she decides she wants to be involved with the daily life of a house, she does, but only because she decides to, in contrast with Férula or others, and when she [Clara] wants to stay in her world, in her magic, she does, but she decides, life does not decide on her behalf, this is what I like about her.

It is interesting to note how the above man reader contrasts Clara and Férula. Férula was the essence of sacrifice as she had devoted all her life to look after her sick mother. In contrast, Clara offered an alternative to sacrifice and devotion; she was able to take control of her own life, decide when to take action or otherwise remain in a world of her own. I believe that the above reader's attraction to Clara must have resided in her independence, autonomy and self-willed attributes which would normally be associated with male and not female characters.

Clara's characterization offered British and Spanish readers a multiplicity of readings given Clara's multi-layered representation. On the one hand, Clara

was represented in a traditional manner by marrying Esteban, becoming a mother and ultimately remaining married despite all the abuse inflicted by her husband. However, Clara survived and subverted tradition by employing typical feminine attributes such as sensitivity, intuition and passivity. These helped her along with her resistance strategies and also meant that although essentialising, these attributes made Clara's characterization transgressive and unconventional. Ultimately, coming to terms with Clara was difficult for some readers primarily because they could not identify with her and learn from her: 'Clara is a very difficult person to understand and relate to, in a way, I think you have to take her on trust, the fact that she is this true odd spiritual being, who can move from being fairly tacit to be very active' (Nottingham Library, *The House of the Spirits*). As expressed by this Nottingham reader, Clara may not work as a character because she is hard to 'relate to' and therefore hard to ground in reality, to imagine another "Clara" in the "real" world. However, what for some readers may seem an impossible barrier to cross, others finally achieve a comfortable relationship with her because Clara and her eccentricities come alive in the "real" world:

Además de vivir la vida que ella [Clara] quiere, es capaz de no estar atada a los cánones sociales, y eso te hace pensar, en una sociedad como la de entonces, con una familia que intenta taparla cuando mueve saleros, es capaz de ser madre, de querer, de que la quieran, de no tener sentimientos encontrados, es como la describe Isabel, que no es un libro de psicología que te esté hablando de un caso real [...] me ha gustado mucho y creo que me sirve para compararlo con la realidad de otras familias, que pueden tener una persona con un problema mental que tiene un comportamiento diferente y que por qué no podemos vivir la vida normalmente, por qué tenemos que tapar algunas cosas que nos ocurren, o algunos aspectos, y algunas veces la familia ayuda a que lo vivamos con afecto, que tengamos una historia y la podamos tratar. (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

As well as living the life she [Clara] wants, she's capable of not being tied by any social rules, and that makes you think, in a society like that one, with a family who tries to hide her when she moves salt cellars, she's able to be a mother, to love and be loved, of not having resentful feelings, it's how Isabel describes her, it's not a psychology book talking about a real case [...] I liked it [The House of the Spirits] a lot and I think that it's useful for me to compare it to the reality of other families, who might have somebody with a mental problem, who behaves differently, and why can't we live our lives normally, why do we have to hide some things that happen to us, or some aspects of it, sometimes family helps us to get through the situation with affection so we can have a story and are able to deal with it.

The above reader's conscious construction of Clara as a fictional character, - 'no está hablando de un caso real' ('not talking about a real case') - does not prevent her from imagining other "Claras" in the "real" world, as people suffering from mental problems. More importantly, being able to read Clara as a prototype for understanding oneself and others, shows that the 'world of the text' and the 'world of the reader' have intersected according to Ricoeur's phenomenological psychology of reading. By reading *The House of the Spirits*, this reader is able to make sense of "real" people's mental illnesses in the "real" world. On the other hand, this reading of Clara makes me interrogate whether by comparing her to "real" people with mental illnesses, this reader is thinking about the unspeakable aspect of Clara's condition, that is, her madness. This would be after all a disappointing reading of Clara and it would ultimately undermine all the political possibilities that Clara's spirituality signified.

Eliza Sommer's Journey to Independence

For many Spanish women readers, Eliza Sommers became the counterpoint to Clara del Valle. All the Spanish groups who had read *Daughter of Fortune* could draw comparisons between Eliza and Clara as they had also read *The House of the Spirits* on a previous occasion as part of their normal reading group choices. This was not possible with the British groups as *Daughter of Fortune* was the only Allende novel read by one group, in this case, the Nottingham Reading Group 1.

British and Spanish readers found Eliza's independence her best attribute. They defined such independence outside the private sphere, by Eliza's contact with the "real" world outside the domesticity of her adopted English family in Chile. British readers, nonetheless, regarded Eliza's experience as rather uncommon from a socio-historical perspective: 'Another woman at the time wouldn't have had the opportunity to do the things she did' (Nottingham Reading Group 1, *Daughter of Fortune*). In this sense, Eliza's restrictions to act freely seemed imposed by her gender. This idea also appears to be supported by her pretended sex change once she arrived in California: '[...] the opportunity she had was often that one of a man, all the things she saw about life, she wouldn't have seen them if she hadn't pretended to be a man' (Reader C, Nottingham Reading Group 1, *Daughter of Fortune*). Eliza's success in the highly competitive and masculine setting of the Californian gold rush was therefore based on a compromise. According to this Nottingham reader, she had to

pretend to be a man if she wanted to succeed. However, Eliza's masculine attire and mannerisms in turn signified for some readers the rejection of her female qualities: 'When she became the man character she was hurt like a woman, she was kind of damaged, she didn't feel like a woman' (Nottingham Reading Group 1, *Daughter of Fortune*). But despite this reader's view, Eliza's temporary masculine image retained the most important feminine quality that defined her, even before the start of her journey: love. Her relationship with Tao Chi'en is characterised by love, the same love that moved her to follow her platonic lover Joaquín Andieta. It could be therefore argued that Eliza does not offer readers a new model of feminine independence as she is constantly being defined by love and heterosexual relationships (Ramblado, 2003:174). This does not mean that Eliza's character does not offer readers a transgressive feminine model. She is transgressive as far as she appears to succeed in fulfilling herself outside the private sphere by being able to explore what it was like to live in a man's world. Although this seemed to have been the view that most Nottingham women readers shared, one man reader in the group thought, nonetheless, that she would have been better off by fulfilling herself in a traditional way, since: 'She gave it all up, she had absolutely everything, she went outside the boundaries and she threw it all up' (Reader B, Nottingham Reading Group 1, *Daughter of Fortune*). This reading of Eliza confirms, to a certain degree, that men and women readers in the group held completely different views about what was acceptable for women like Eliza. According to this man reader, Eliza should have married well, inherited part of the family fortune and lived a comfortable life. Not only this, Eliza was meant to live in the shadow of her husband and keep reproducing the

patriarchal discourses that kept women like Miss Rose believing that independence was something unattainable.

Miss Rose also presented a model of femininity which is by all means not perfect as stated by this Nottingham woman reader: ‘Miss Rose was a model, a female model for what happened to females, she [Eliza] decided not to end up like her’ (Nottingham Reading Group 1, *Daughter of Fortune*). This reader may be referring to the harmful consequences of Miss Rose’s transgression by having an affair with a married man in her youth which left her unmarried and loveless. Nonetheless, Miss Rose exploits her feminine attributes to fulfil herself at least at a private level. As Ramblado (2003: 165-66) suggests, by using a typical feminine attribute such as creativity in the form of writing pornography, she attains her domestic independence. However, Miss Rose is still not the ideal model for other women to follow, - as stated by the above reader - as with Clara del Valle, her actions may not be radical enough although her rebellion from within, may be a necessary step before other women like Eliza can rebel, not only from within, but outside, in the public sphere.

An intriguing aspect for the Nottingham woman readers – as well as for some of the Spanish women readers as shall be seen later on – about Eliza’s character, was being able to discover her motivations to undertake such a journey. For example, the following comments highlighting the typicality and cliché of Eliza’s departure are revealing in many ways:

A: I found a strange thing, that in some ways, I suppose is a very female thing to do, to run after the man you love but actually that was how she got a different life, and she did better afterwards (Nottingham Reading Group 1, *Daughter of Fortune*).

It seems that Eliza's decision to leave because of love becomes somehow problematic for this Nottingham reader. As suggested earlier on in this chapter, this kind of reading may only make sense taking into account what Jane S. Jaquette (1973) has referred to as Western misconceptions about Latin American feminisms. According to Jaquette, the origins of these misconceptions need to be situated within the differences between Western feminisms and Latin American feminisms since:

A whole generation of North American women have become convinced of their powerlessness relative to males and have moved to destroy the role differentiation they perceive as its cause. The Latin American woman correctly perceives role differentiation as the key to her power and influence. Even the notions of 'separateness' and 'mystery' of women, which are viewed in the North American context as male propaganda chiefly used to discriminate against women, are seen in the Latin American context as images to be enhanced, not destroyed (Jaquette, 1973:20).

Given the elimination of 'role differentiation' that underlies Western feminisms, it is not surprising that the above woman reader struggled to come to terms with the contradiction brought by Eliza having obtained the freedom and new experiences that were reserved to men through a typical feminine attribute such as love. As noted in chapter four and according to Latin American feminist Beatriz Sarlo (1991), women's actions could be regarded as political even when women use typical feminine qualities to achieve what sometimes is believed to be a non-political outcome such as Clara's unconventional mechanisms of resistance used to subvert patriarchy. However, for the above Nottingham reader, - more than likely influenced by the Western feminist misconceptions Jaquette's refers to - typical feminine qualities are seen as undermining women's freedom and autonomy rather than helping women attain change in their lives.

In the two Spanish groups from Azuqueca where *Hija de la fortuna* was read, in contrast to their British counterparts, women readers were mostly concerned with realist issues regarding the character's credibility. In these two groups, the feminist reading of Eliza was relegated to the background although some readers made references to Eliza's strong personality and braveness: 'realmente fue muy fuerte, pero que si no le ayuda el chino, la ayuda fue decisiva' (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la fortuna*) ('She [Eliza] was really brave but if the Chinese guy hadn't helped her, his help was decisive') or '[...] ella es valiente para tomar esa decisión [...] ella dio el paso de lanzarse y tuvo la suerte de tener esas ayudas, de encontrarse a esas personas ' (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la fortuna*) ('[...] she is very brave to make that decision [...] she took the step of setting off and was lucky to get help, to meet those people'). Although the above Spanish readers did not take these comments any further, both signalled a peculiar characteristic of Allende's heroines. Eliza – as well as Alba in *The House of the Spirits* - needed men's support to survive and later fulfil herself despite the braveness and determination that readers identified. Eliza is able to finish her journey of self-discovery because Tao Chi'en saves her from dying after losing her baby, accompanying her all the way to San Francisco. Once the journey is over, Tao continues to be a powerful presence in Eliza's life and together they form a successful partnership in love as well as in business. What needs to be stressed is that all the help and support Eliza receives from Tao does not necessarily have to be interpreted as undermining Eliza's feminism. On the contrary, it should be read as a sign on behalf of Allende to be faithful to a period where women's circumstances required men's support in order to empower and fulfil themselves.

What was equally stressed on a couple of occasions among the Spanish groups was the idea that Eliza was a character ‘precoz’ (‘precocious’) (Biblioteca de Azuqueca, *Hija de la fortuna*) and ‘adelantado a su tiempo’ (‘ahead of her own time’) (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la fortuna*) since ‘Eliza, clandestinamente, contra viento y marea se arriesga para ir a buscar a su amado’ (Biblioteca de Azuqueca, *Hija de la fortuna*) (‘Eliza, secretly, against all odds, takes the risk to go off ahead and search for her lover’) or ‘[...] es una chica joven, prácticamente una adolescente y las aventuras en las que se embarcó por un chico que prácticamente acababa de conocer y en aquellos tiempos, claro’ (Biblioteca Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la fortuna*) (‘[...] she’s a young girl, practically a teenager and the adventures she embarked on because of a young lad who she barely knew and of course in those times’). Although it could be argued that the above comments could be read from a feminist perspective, I am more inclined to think that the above readers’ comments were instead signalling a concern regarding the character’s credibility. How credible was it that a young woman like Eliza could carry out such a long journey, risking her life in search of the love of her life? Other readers’ comments also confirmed the difficulty in believing what happened to Eliza: ‘Nos gusta pero lo veo demasiado porque es en el 1832 que nace Eliza, en 1848 es cuando se va a América y de todo eso que sobreviva a un viaje tan largo’ (Biblioteca de Azuqueca, *Hija de la fortuna*) (‘We like her but it goes too far because it is in 1832 when Eliza is born, in 1848 when she goes to America and with all this, she survives such a long journey’) or:

Yo lo que pasa es que tengo la teoría de que no existe ningún hombre así, creo que en la vida real sería muy difícil lo primero adoptar una decisión así sin más ni más, lo segundo hacer todo lo que hizo ella, llegar dónde llegó con los medios que disponía, a mí me parece que es una situación muy irreal pero bueno realmente es una novela (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la fortuna*).

I have this theory that men [like the one Eliza is searching for] don't exist, I think that in real life it would be very difficult, firstly, to make a decision like that without giving it too much thought, secondly, to be able to do all she did, to get where she got with the means she had, it seems to me a pretty unreal situation but well, after all it's a novel.

It is interesting to see how this group of readers, although accepting that the character of Eliza and her adventures may not be “real”, still strived to look for reasons which would help to explain her decision to leave everything for a man and finally be able to situate Eliza’s story in the realm of the “real”:

*Bibliotecaria: Yo sí creo que es una cosa de allí, quiero decir que en esa parte del mundo las mujeres a los veinte años ya se es una solterona, y no sé empiezan a despertar a la sexualidad muy pronto y a los quince ya mantienen relaciones, y es muy normal, y eso sí que lo refleja el libro (Biblioteca de Azuqueca, *Hija de la fortuna*).*

Librarian [woman]: I believe it [referring to Eliza's precociousness] is something very South American, what I mean is that in that part of the world, women at twenty would already be considered spinsters and I don't know, they start to awaken their sexuality very early and when they are fifteen they already have sex and it is very normal and this is precisely what the book reflects.

In the context of the above quote, the librarian-moderator from Azuqueca is able to situate Eliza’s adventures in the realm of the “real” by explicitly establishing the ‘difference’ between Spanish and South American cultures. What may be considered implausible in the Spanish context, may be perfectly “normal” within South American parameters. Moreover, this ‘difference’ may be underpinned by a kind of moral superiority which dates back to the colonial Spain in which the colonised peoples were regarded as culturally inferior and where the colonisers knew best. Ultimately, this ‘difference’ may be serving another purpose, that is, to establish some distance or dis-identification between the reader(s) and Eliza’s character and what she represents. However, this comment should also be read

in conjunction with another quote from the same librarian, who on this occasion calls upon some kind of common Spanish cultural identity to be able to identify with Eliza's circumstances:

Bibliotecaria: No sé como lo veis pero el hecho de que ella en su casa esté muy sola, que tenga más relación con la cocinera que con el resto de la familia, entonces es una persona que tiene un cierto punto de independencia y también la falta de cariño, entonces eso hace que de repente encuentre un amor y deje todo pero que tampoco tiene esos lazos afectivos tan fuertes con la familia, le sigue a él, yo pienso que ahí hay también algo de eso (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la Fortuna*).

Librarian [woman]: I don't know how the rest of you see this, I also believe that she [Eliza] feels lonely at home, the fact that she has a closer relationship with the cook than with the rest of her own family, then she is a person who's got a certain degree of independence and also a lack of affection, for that reason when she suddenly finds love, she gives everything up, but then because she hasn't got such strong ties with her family, she follows him, so I think all this has something to do with her situation.

In this instance, the librarian-moderator appears to call upon shared concepts deeply rooted in Spanish culture which all readers in the group would have been able to understand and relate to since they draw upon what Stuart Hall (1990) has defined as cultural identity 'first position'. In this sense, Spanish cultural identity could be defined as

in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective "one true self", hiding inside many other, more superficially or artificially imposed "selves", which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as "one people" with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history (Hall, 1990: 223).

It appears that the librarian-moderator from Azuqueca drew upon the importance still granted to the institution of the family in Spanish society and although she did not clearly say that Eliza did not have a family, the implication was that Eliza

lived in a void that would not exist if she felt she really belonged to one. Also, sharing a kind of common Spanish cultural identity played an important role in bringing Azuqueca 2 readers together in understanding Eliza's actions:

*Yo también pienso que si no está embarazada que no se va, porque al estar embarazada por "el que dirán", por tantos prejuicios que tenía, por eso se va yo creo (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la Fortuna*).*

I also think that if she [Eliza] wasn't pregnant, she wouldn't have left, because being pregnant, people would have gossiped, because of the prejudice, and she leaves because of her pregnancy.

The above reader relied on the sharing of the famous 'qué dirán' –literally 'what will people say'. This idea about the importance given to what other people in the community may think about somebody's actions is so deeply rooted in the Spanish psyche that from time to time it becomes a resource to explain what in the case of Eliza may seem unexplainable by other means. Besides, not only the librarian-moderator but also some other women readers in the group drew upon cultural difference to explain the 'strange' relationship Eliza had with Miss Rose:

*Tiene una relación un poco extraña, pero sí contaban que se bañaban juntas a días, a días no la veía y semanas que se pasaba todo el tiempo en la cocina pero que otros días sí que tenían más contacto (Biblioteca de Azuqueca, *Hija de la fortuna*).*

She [Eliza] has got a rather strange relationship [with Miss Rose] but she [Eliza] tells us that some days they would bath together, some days she would not see her [Miss Rose] at all and that she would spend weeks in the kitchen the whole time but sometimes they had more contact.

And in response to this, another reader concluded: 'Era el carácter este inglés, que no son como nosotros' (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la fortuna*) ('It was the English temperament, they are not like us').

It appears that for the above readers Eliza's relationship with her adopted family and in particular with Miss Rose was the norm since Miss Rose's cultural

identity, her “Englishness” explained the way she related to Eliza. Not only this, Miss Rose became a stereotype to generalise and talk about the “English” identity and compare it to the Spanish. The words ‘no son como nosotros’ (‘they are not like us’) stressed the fact that cultural difference seemed to have informed the way some of the Azuqueca’s readers made sense of their readings. What is interesting about these readers’ responses is their understanding of ‘cultural identity as proceeding in a straight unbroken line, from some fixed origin [...] as an essence rather than a “positioning”’ (Hall, 1990:226). Perhaps it was more reassuring for the Azuqueca librarian and readers to construct cultural identity under essentialising parameters which artificially hide those ruptures which may shatter any certainties about identity formations. For the last several years, Spain has seen a considerable increase in the influx of South American immigrants who alongside other North African peoples may have awakened the search for a more culturally homogeneous idea of “Spanishness”, in the light of such diversity brought in by the different ethnic groups which form part of current Spanish society. It may be that the two Azuqueca readers, prompted by the librarian-moderator’s comments, may be unconsciously expressing certain anxieties about their own identities through their readings and interpretations of ‘Other’ cultures. In this respect, reading groups and the act of reading may serve the function of not only exploring new subject positions but also to reassert old subjectivities.

Conclusion

This chapter has focussed on the readers' responses to three main characters – and one minor one - in two of Allende's novels read by British and Spanish groups.

Esteban Trueba's authoritarian and cruel behaviour encouraged British and Spanish readers' critical stance towards this patriarchal figure. Nonetheless, readers' responses to Trueba showed that despite his unacceptable conduct, some readers still were compliant with the bourgeois capitalist and oppressive values he represented. This reading of Trueba was possible since he appeared to possess a 'moral quality' only within the narrative which made him into a coherent character with credible attributes and credible psychological motivated actions. Generally, this resulted in benevolent British and Spanish readers' responses which, after all, were judging the character's coherence rather than the morality of his actions.

Another aspect of Trueba's attributes which produced some interesting responses from readers - and in particular by the only men group of readers in this research – was Trueba's embodiment of violence. The outcome of Trueba's violence as well as of his illegitimate son, Colonel Esteban García was that of distancing or dis-identification on behalf of the men group of readers. In the case of Colonel Esteban García, readers employed allegorical mechanisms to make sense of this character's brutal behaviour. These mechanisms allowed Leicester readers to safely distance themselves from the character. Nonetheless, what the

fascination with Trueba's and García's violence may have unconsciously signalled was the urge to explore these readers' uncomfortable relationship with violence at least within the safer world of fiction. In this respect, fiction served as a platform to explore these men's subjectivities in relation to violence as it plays an important role in asserting men's masculinities in the "real" world (Connell, 1995).

Finally, some readings of Trueba highlighted his feminine side, the sharing of Cixous' feminine libidinal economy or 'his entrance into the zone of androgyny' (Gould Levine, 1990). For some readers Trueba's feminisation is what is needed to save the character from his "sins". This move on Allende's behalf towards the end of the novel, does not always work since some readers seem to contest the author's conciliatory tone which ultimately may also exonerate those like Trueba who have abused or abuse power outside fiction.

In this chapter I also analysed readers' responses to Clara del Valle in *The House of the Spirits*. In terms of narrative structure, readers stressed the importance and centrality of this character, acting as a counterbalance to the patriarchal discourse of Esteban Trueba. Nonetheless, British and Spanish readers' relationship with Clara was at times ambiguous and problematic. In particular British women readers found hard to reconcile with Clara's unconventional representation especially due to her spiritual side. Clara's spirituality is for some readers the cause of her eccentric behaviour regarding two important feminine roles, those of dutiful mother and wife. Nevertheless, some Spanish women readers in particular, found her spirituality empowering since it not only subverted the patriarchal discourse of Esteban Trueba but also elevated her relationship with her daughter to a new dimension where the material

becomes obsolete and the mother-daughter relationship is based on ‘interchangeability and the flowing of the female fluid’ (Ramblado, 2003:139).

Conversely, the positive side of Clara’s spirituality was mostly overlooked by British and Spanish readers. Generally readers did not engage with the political possibilities the spiritual offered at an individual level, by acting as a nurturing space for women, as a ‘support network’ (Bennett, 1998) and at a collective level when Clara decides to work with the disadvantaged women and children in *Las Tres Marías*.

At times, British and Spanish readers also equated Clara’s spirituality with passivity. However, there were other instances where Clara was seen as a determined and active woman who would step in when circumstances required. Perhaps readers’ ambivalent responses – contradictory at times - to Clara reside in the difficulty some British female readers in particular had in relating to Clara as a “real” person, as somebody who may inhabit the “real” world.

Finally, this chapter discussed the different responses from British and Spanish readers to the character of Eliza Sommers in *Daughter of Fortune*. Whereas British readings of Eliza Sommers were analysed from a feminist prism, Spanish readings were, however, more concerned with the character’s realistic status.

Within the only British group who had read *Daughter of Fortune*, it was interesting to note that women and men readers’ views were informed by their own gender positioning. As for the British women readers, Eliza offered a transgressive model of female subjectivity, within the socio-historical parameters established by the novel. For the male readers, Eliza’s transgression appeared, on the contrary, detrimental to her future. Also, some women readers in the

British context, however, struggled with the inherent contradiction in Eliza's attaining her freedom by means of her search for love. This contradiction needs to be understood in the context of Latin American feminisms where unlike Western feminisms a political outcome can be achieved by using typical feminine qualities such as love (Sarlo, 1991).

Conversely, Spanish readers' responses to Eliza Sommers focussed on establishing the character's credibility of her actions. What was interesting to note in the Spanish context was the drawing upon ideas that are related to concepts of 'cultural identity' and 'difference' that, in turn, aimed at anchoring Eliza's narrative within the "real". Perhaps, what these readers' interpretations revealed was deeper anxieties about what is to be "Spanish" and "woman" in a climate where identities are subjected to constant negotiation. This could be due to the increased amount of external influence, in the form of economic migration, that post-colonial Spain has been experiencing in the last few years.

Chapter Six

British and Spanish Readers' Responses to Isabel Allende in *Paula*

Introduction⁶⁶

This chapter analyses British and Spanish readers' responses to Allende's fictionalised memoirs in *Paula*. It starts by highlighting British and Spanish readers' genre expectations of *Paula* and how genre conventions may have influenced readers' interpretations of this Allende work. Special attention will also be placed on how Allende's 'simulation of identity' (Ramblado, 2003) may have encouraged readers to establish truth claims about Allende's fictional self and by extension, her work.

This chapter also examines the different readers' responses to how Allende's own representations fulfil typical feminine roles such as those of mother and wife in *Paula*. This analysis particularly emphasises how the different readings produced aim ultimately at self-interrogating women readers' subjectivities by means of identification or dis-identification processes.

This chapter finally explores issues already discussed in chapter three in relation to Allende's production of 'extra-literary' discourses surrounding her

⁶⁶ Only two out of the ten British groups in this research read *Paula*. However, in the Spanish context although the Marchamalo reading group was the only group which had exclusively read *Paula* for the discussion, other groups were able to comment briefly about *Paula* since this book had been read in the past.

public representation. Mainly through the examples of a radio interview and the use of the internet, this section also demonstrates how current literary celebrity culture encourages readers' fascination with the writers' private selves and how, in turn, this fascination may influence readers' interpretations of a writer's autobiographical account such as Allende's *Paula*.

***Paula*, Between Autobiography and Fiction**

In *Paula*, British and Spanish readers recognised that they faced up to a novel which proved tricky to pin down in genre terms:

A: She's written nine books and we're reading the sixth, but funnily enough in our library it shows as an autobiography and not as fiction, so all this happened to Allende, I'm sure it has happened to her but I suppose she might have *easily forgotten, embroidered things or authored them* (my emphasis) (Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*).

Bibliotecaria: Lo que sí hemos comentado bastante es si se puede considerar una biografía de Isabel Allende, en parte sí y en parte no porque nos hemos encontrado con varios episodios que no pueden ser verdad, por ejemplo la carta de Paula, no sé no creo que sea verdad, es eso como ella dice una vivencia literaria para que le cuadre la novela (Biblioteca de Marchamalo, *Paula*).

Librarian [woman]: What we have discussed a lot is if we could consider it an autobiography, in a way yes, in a way no, because we have come across several episodes that cannot be true, for example, Paula's letter, I don't know, I don't believe it's real, it's as she [Allende] says, a literary experience so the novel works.

Although unable to resolve the blur surrounding *Paula's* genre, British and Spanish women readers, however, acknowledged the fact that *Paula* had been fictionalised. Despite this, once readers got into the story most of them read it as an autobiographical account resisting the idea of it not being the "truth": 'If this

turns out to be fiction I should feel very let down' (Reader D, Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*). In addition to this, what these comments also suggest is that on the one hand, British and Spanish readers held a "blind" belief in what Allende narrated as the "truth". On the other, *Paula* readers were also prepared to accept a degree of fictionalisation when certain accounts would not 'fit in', such as the reference just seen to the letter Paula wrote before her death, made by the librarian in Marchamalo. This "blind" trust on Allende's account makes sense within what Elizabeth Long identified as the 'humanistic innocence about meaning' that characterises reading groups' readings since:

Reading groups retain [...] a deep allegiance to the conventions of realism [...] they tend to accept the "facts" a novelist writes about as true. [...] discussants appear to be informed by an older "mimetic" understanding of literature as an imitation or representation of reality [...] (Long, 1986: 604-5).

but also, and specifically in the case of *Paula*, due to the 'strong self-referential elements' Allende displays in this work (Ramblado 2003:31). Nonetheless, what this overall picture initially suggests is that British and Spanish readers were prepared to read *Paula* moving between "truth" and fiction whenever the situation required. These moves appear to be particularly significant when later on in this chapter we will see readers adopting moral positions to judge Isabel Allende. Equally, what seems to be prevailing throughout these readers' readings – despite any attempts to situate *Paula* at a fictional level - is a deep belief in Allende's truthful representation of what happened to herself, her daughter and her family.

Allende's Motherhood in *Paula*

In *Paula*, Isabel Allende was not only playing the role of the author as the omnipresent figure who has control over any detail in the narrative. She also became one of the main characters in her own story and some British and Spanish readers recognised that, after all, *Paula* was more about Isabel Allende than her daughter: 'Ella [Allende] te cuenta la historia de su vida y de su hija que se está muriendo pero en realidad la historia es de ella' (Biblioteca de Marchamalo, *Paula*) ('She [Allende] tells you the story of her life and her daughter who's dying but in fact the story is about her [Allende]') or 'But it is true that the book covers much more about Isabel than Paula' (Reader D, Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*). It is therefore not surprising that British and Spanish readers' discussions focussed almost exclusively on Isabel Allende given the prominence her character attained.

However, British and Spanish readers discussed Allende's role within certain parameters. Allende was not judged aesthetically on the basis of being a "good" or "bad" writer but on her fulfilment of typical feminine roles as mother and wife. Among the several criticisms Allende had to face as mother, the following are just a few examples. One woman reader in the Birmingham Group 1 held Allende responsible for her daughter's fatal illness because she and her husband never considered the risks of having a family, knowing about Michael's serious condition, porphyria: '[...] since Isabel's husband, Michael, had inherited the condition, they shouldn't have had children at all' (Reader B, Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*). Some Southwell readers found that Allende had not looked after Paula in the best possible way: 'I was surprised she [Allende] waited

so long as she did to move Paula out of hospital' (Reader C, Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*); reader D also added with a critical tone: 'She wasn't short of money to do so, was she?' (Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*). Similarly, Allende was criticised regarding the neglect her son had suffered before and after Paula's illness: 'What struck me was that Isabel, the mother isn't concerned about her son, you know, it's only Paula, Paula, Paula ' (Reader B, Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*), but reader C in trying to excuse this behaviour said: 'She couldn't cope with her son' (Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*). This defensive answer was further refuted by reader D when saying 'but she [Allende] thought about her lovers, didn't she?' And later on the same reader went on to add:

I am very critical of her when she goes off with her unnamed lover, she never gives a name, she goes off to, what country is it, Spain? She goes off wanting to take her children but Michael wouldn't let her, but she still went and left those children quite young, the mother has the main care of the children, doesn't she? (Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*).

Interestingly, similar opinions emerged in the Spanish context in the Marchamalo group:

Ella [Allende] dejó a los hijos por ese gran amor que tenía, los hijos no eran mayores porque el pequeño se negó a comer y cuando regresó estaba delgadísimo, se había negado a comer desde que ella se había ido (Biblioteca de Marchamalo, *Paula*).

She [Allende] left her children because of that great love affair she had; her children were still young because the little one refused to eat and when she came back he was very skinny, he had refused to eat since the day she left.

What all these criticisms seem to have in common was readers' disapproval of Allende's selfish attitudes which ultimately aimed at fulfilling herself as an individual but not as a mother. If she made the decision – though irresponsible,

according to Birmingham reader B – of becoming a mother, she should have been prepared to be fully devoted to her family, not to mention abandoning her children for a fortuitous love affair.

This reading of Allende could also be interpreted within Chodorow's thesis about the reproduction of mothering where women's ultimate function is to 'reproduce people – physically in their housework and child care, psychologically in their emotional support of husbands and their maternal relation to sons and daughters' (Chodorow, 1978: 36). Or similarly, what Sharon Hays identifies as 'the cultural model of socially appropriate mothering' in the form of an 'ideology of intensive mothering' which: 'advises mothers to expend a tremendous amount of time, energy and money in raising their children' (Hays, 1996:x). In this respect, any attempts made by Allende to reproduce herself by neglecting her duties as mother and/or wife became reproved in the eyes of these readers.

Besides, Southwell readers C and D, by explicitly highlighting Allende's position of power - not only in monetary terms but implicitly as a well-known author - may have also been inadvertently critical of Allende's passivity when she did not attempt to search for a better alternative, given the unsuitability of Paula's medical care while in hospital. Overall, it appears that these women readers did not consider Allende as the prototype of "good" mothering and subsequently they seem to have distanced themselves from Allende in such a role.

This distancing was possible for several reasons. Isabel Allende was regarded by the readers as a woman of flesh and blood and experienced as "real". Although Isabel Allende, the character in *Paula*, is as much a construct as any

other fictional character in her novels, readers overlooked this element and elevated her fictional status to the “real”. British and Spanish readers knew that out there, in the “real” world, Isabel Allende the writer and mother existed and this was good enough reason to validate or condemn her actions and behaviour according to their own set of accepted moral criteria (Hallam and Marshment, 2000:135), despite being aware of the potential fictionalisation of her accounts. Furthermore, once readers decided to treat Allende as “real”, it became difficult for them to separate both, the fictional from the non-fictional, especially since readers may also have been influenced by the great amount of ‘extra-literary’ discourses that publicly circulate about Allende and which seem to encourage this constant blur. In this respect, Isabel the fictional character in *Paula*, and Isabel the writer outside her work, becomes on numerous occasions only one person.

Allende also came “alive” because as a woman, she spoke to these women readers when recalling her lived experiences. These experiences feel very close to these readers as most of them may have also experienced similar accounts to those Allende describes. Thus, at the beginning readers feel close to Allende, identifying themselves in the typical feminine roles she takes on, but this identification transforms into distancing when Allende does not seem to fulfil these readers’ expectations. It appears that these readers’ strong criticisms are the result of imagining how they would have acted differently if they had been in Allende’s position. This was, nonetheless, also possible because of the likelihood of these women readers experiencing Allende’s actions and behaviour as “real” at an emotional level. British and Spanish readers equally felt attracted to *Paula’s* accounts because they identified with the emotions the author had

mobilised in the story. As discussed in chapter four, ‘what is recognised as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world: “a structure of feeling” and it is emotions which count in a “structure of feeling”’ (Ang, 1985:45) and this is the way in which women readers expressed it:

Yo creo que en el fondo ella [Allende] siente lo que sentimos todas y no podemos expresar, muchas cosas que ella dice, es una mujer tan liberal, tan expresiva, con tantas ganas de vivir, que tu dices en el fondo sí, sí esto es lo que soy yo (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I think that deep down she [Allende] feels what we all feel and cannot express, a lot of things that she says, she’s such a liberal woman, so expressive, with such a hunger for life that you say to yourself: yes, this is what I am too.

It seems that, above all, this woman reader emotionally identified with Allende as a woman irrespective of her own individual situation. It seems Allende’s appeal resides in being able to represent ‘facets of a collective character constructed at a broader narrative level’ (Bridgwood, 1986:168) that could speak to women collectively, going beyond individual experiences. As already discussed in chapter three, the identifications these readers experienced may also be happening because according to Bridgwood, and in the specific case of family sagas, ‘the sense of distance and difference between writers and readers is reduced’ (1986:169) making readers consider their own family histories as potentially valued material to write the next ‘bestseller’ (*ibid*, 172) as this Southwell reader hoped: ‘I wish somebody could put the history of our family in such a way’ (Reader E, Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*). Not only this, but the

universalisation of the potential power to write such fiction [family sagas] is matched by the universalisation of the fiction’s material – despite variants of geographical, historical and class settings - the saga’s families’ fictionalised lives are nevertheless structured around a number of dilemmas which can be essentially similar for women of entirely different national, social and economic groups (*ibid*, 171).

In this respect, and by Allende carefully combining ‘universal’ themes as well as appealing to the readers’ emotions, she appears to have found the perfect combination to have successfully attracted British and Spanish women readers to *Paula*.

Besides the disapproval Allende received of her role as mother, British and Spanish readers’ ideas on “good” mothering also triggered certain speculation about the reasons behind Allende’s writing of such an autobiographical account. Some Campanillas, Azuqueca and Southwell readers were also critical of Allende since she had used her daughter’s illness and suffering to fulfil her own literary aspirations:

Le [Allende] veo un poco egoísta porque yo creo que una madre en esa situación, por las madres que yo he tratado, en una situación así, a mí me parece que ella saca, yo que sé tantas cosas, hasta la vida sexual. (Campanillas, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I see her [Allende] as a bit selfish because I think a mother in that situation, in my own experience dealing with mothers, in a situation like this, it seems to me that she [Allende] airs, I don’t know, so many things, even [her daughter’s] sexual life.

Yo en su momento pensé que había aprovechado la enfermedad de la hija y apoyándose en la enfermedad, vuelve a revivir su vida y volvértela a contar (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 1, *Hija de la fortuna*).

At some point I thought that she [Allende] was taking advantage of her daughter’s illness and taking her illness as a pretext, to revisit her life and tell you about her life all over again.

B: I felt a little bit, oh! She’s exploiting Paula” (Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*).

And in response to this, a group member added:

A: I know what you mean; although I felt she started genuinely in a kind of therapeutic way, a way to get through terrible feelings (Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*).

What the above comments highlight are the tensions British and Spanish readers experienced when trying to reconcile the private and public domains in Allende. On the one hand, they seemed to approve of Allende's choice as a career woman, as a successful novelist but on the other, they found it hard to accept that such a personal and painful moment in her life had to be used as her "passport" to fame and self-fulfilment. Furthermore, some readers suggested that either dissatisfaction or guilt in the private realm could have triggered the writing:

D: I didn't think she felt guilty; I thought she felt a lot of dissatisfaction about her life. She was more saying that, until she wrote her novel, especially those years in Venezuela she felt she hadn't achieved anything by the time she was forty, I didn't think she felt guilty, I thought she felt dissatisfied with herself (Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*).

In addition, some readers implied that guilt not only had pushed Allende to write this autobiographical account but also was partly the result of "bad" mothering:

C: I wonder whether she feels not so good about what has happened in her life, her decisions, you know, the time she went away, and about the daughter, her two children, she left them with the father, grandmother, with Michael's mother, it's a kind of guilt perhaps, she's confessing in this story, in this writing (Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*).

What the two comments above suggest, is that Allende's own investment in writing *Paula* was about achieving literary success and that motherhood had not fulfilled her. This view may represent once more one of the many cultural contradictions of contemporary motherhood, the pressure women feel to be considered "good" mothers and also successful in their careers. However, if *Paula's* readers in this research ended mostly concentrating their attention on Allende's role as mother since Allende offered them her particular account of her experience as such, this could also be interpreted as Allende's self-fulfilment

originating in her experience as a mother and not as a successful journalist and writer. As Pauline Palmer suggests, if many women writers employ ‘mothering themes in their novels [...] rather than themes of women’s experience of paid employment and political struggle in the public world’ (Palmer, 1989:98), one may be inclined to think that after all there must be some kind of reward – ‘maternal jouissance’ in Kristevan terms – in bearing and rearing children. Or as Lynne Segal claims:

the new focus on mothering, the maternal revival in feminism, has come partly from feminists’ disappointment that our aspirations to engage in creative and rewarding work, to struggle for social change, to build warm and supportive communal spaces and friendship networks – as well as choose to have children – have proved so often difficult, stressful or transitory (Segal in Palmer, 1989:98).

In this respect, the ‘dissatisfaction’ readers refer to, may not have originated in Allende’s mothering duties failing her in feeling reproduced, but on the emotional rollercoaster she may have experienced while trying to succeed as a journalist in her early career years as well as trying to fulfil her domestic duties as mother and wife.

Women readers also discussed matters around Allende’s family representations and in particular about what a “good” wife should be. On the one hand, some readers in the Birmingham Reading Group 1 showed disapproval of Allende’s unfaithfulness while married. Yet when she decided to start a new life with a new husband, everybody seemed to support such a decision. Having love affairs with flutists in Spain was not acceptable, but once the institution of marriage came into place, things were all right.

Another example which echoed the tensions brought up by Allende's family representations in *Paula* was some of the readers' disappointment at Michael's – Paula's father – invisibility: 'Michael is hardly there for Paula during the whole year, ... it's always Paula and her isn't it? You don't feel Michael has this huge relationship with her [sic] daughter' (Reader C, Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*). This urge of wanting to see Michael playing an active role as nurturer might also be concealing once more a rather traditional view on the family hierarchy where the father figure, no matter in which shape and form appears, is essential in the making of any family. What this kind of traditional views further suggest is that these women readers might have been brought up seeing the family as something "natural" and where gender roles were fixed and essentialised. In this respect, once more, readers' own worlds seemed to have been the main point of reference to establish readers' own moral positions in relation to Allende's actions and behaviour in *Paula*.

The underlying theme of this entire section has mainly addressed readers' moral evaluation of Allende validating or condemning her actions and behaviour. This was possible not only because some women readers may have experienced similar circumstances to Allende's when fulfilling their roles as mothers and wives. More crucial than this was readers' connection to Allende at an emotional level. Allende's accounts allowed women readers to explore different subject positions by being able to experience her at the level of 'fantasy' as shall be discussed in more detail within the next section.

Women Readers' Self-Interrogation through Allende's *Paula*

When discussing *Paula*, most British and Spanish women readers appear to have predominantly focussed on aspects that are common to them as women. These women's realities and experiences constitute their reference point when reading, and their criticisms or judgements made of Allende as a mother and wife are likely to be grounded in these women's own ideas and experiences on motherhood, married life and by extension what constitutes family life. Thus, by bringing in their judgements and criticisms, these women were establishing their own moral positions in relation to Allende since as Ramblado argues:

women's self-representation is other-related and other directed (Castillo, 1992b:242): it is channelled through the representation of others (Gilmore,1994a:x), because in many cases women perceive themselves and their experiences in relation to others, not in isolation (*ibid*, xiii). It is other directed because it aims to communicate and to establish a relationship with the readers (Tompkins, (1987) 1991:1083-4) (Ramblado, 2003:20).

In this context, Allende's women readers are not only exploring but also possibly adopting new subject positions that would be risky to adopt in "real" life. According to Ang (1997), this is possible because although Isabel Allende may be read mimetically, she is still part of a textual construction, which situates her at the level of 'fantasy', even if as has already been discussed, readers may not regard Allende as 'fantasy'. What is important for these women readers is that by 'acting out their fantasies', whether realistic or not, they may find answers to negotiate their own personal situations in "real" life. This is also the moment when 'the world of the text' and the 'world of the reader' not only intersect (Ricoeur, 1988) but also transform readers' lives as they find the 'world

of the text' significant to negotiate their own situations in "real" life. In the words of El Palo women readers:

Ella misma dice que se vio enfrentada como casi todas lo hemos hecho ante situaciones límite que te hacen cambiar y la verdad el final de la historia de Paula pues es tremendo, no te puedes imaginar tomar este paso para olvidarte de un ser querido, entonces ella ahí como que te hace pensar, adentrarte en lo que tú puedas pensar y querer actuar en una situación límite, es decir, como actuaría yo (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

She [Allende] says that she saw herself confronting, as almost all of us have done under extreme circumstances that make you change and the truth is the end of the story about Paula is terrible, you can't imagine taking that step to forget about a loved one, so in that situation she [Allende] makes you think, go deeper into what you might think and how you would want to react in an extreme situation, I mean, how I would react.

Vamos, yo siempre soy muy empática, siempre me pongo mucho en el lugar de la otra persona, entonces lo sufrí, sí que es cierto que te pones a pensar realmente que es lo que sería para ti pasar por una situación así ¿no? (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I mean, I've always been very sympathetic, I always really put myself in the other person's place, so I suffered, it is true that you start to think about how you would feel if you were in a similar situation, don't you?

A common underlying assumption that could be extracted from the comments above is that: 'For these readers, literary reflection is fundamentally rooted in reflection about the self. Readers focus on fictional selves and appropriate them for their own self-development' (Long, 1987:322). Not only that, it also appears 'whether in fiction or in their lives, they [readers] construe character development in serious and moral terms' (*ibid*, 323) since:

Es que yo personalmente pienso pero ¿tú puedes llegar a superar la muerte de un hijo? Yo soy incapaz. Yo reconozco lo que ella dice como escritora pero yo siendo sincera, yo me extrañaría y diría pero ¿esta mujer? Esta mujer no está normal. Entonces yo podría quedar muy bien y decir ¡oh! Sí yo la comprendo, vale como escritora te comprendo pero como madre yo creo que no te comprendo (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

The thing is, I personally think, could you ever recover from the death of a child? I know I couldn't. I recognise what she says as a writer but me being honest, I would find it strange and I'd say what's up with this woman? This woman is not normal. So I could make myself look good and say oh!! I do understand her, ok, as a writer I understand you, but as a mother, I don't think I understand you.

What is fascinating to see is that in this instance this woman reader is able to separate the “real” from the fictional Allende. On the one hand, and by situating Allende’s accounts at a fictional level rather than “real”: ‘[...] como escritora te comprendo, pero como madre creo que no te comprendo’ (‘[...] as a writer I understand you but as a mother, I don’t think I understand you’) it appears that Allende’s “real” status as a novelist made special allowances for her actions and behaviour. In other words, by this reader situating what Allende wrote at the level of fiction, that is, by this reader recognising that, after all, Allende’s actions and accounts may not be “real”, this reader is suggesting that there has to be a difference between Allende the author and Allende the mother. Otherwise, if Allende’s accounts were read as “real” in a mimetic sense, her actions and behaviour would be unreservedly condemned since: ‘si fuera nuestra vecina, la juzgaríamos de distinta manera a la escritora’ (‘if she was our neighbour, we would judge her in a different way to the writer’) (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

Equally important is to underline that some of the reflections made by women readers revealed the self-interrogation processes which some of these women had experienced when reading *Paula*: ‘[...] entonces ella ahí como que te hace pensar, adentarte en lo que tú puedas pensar y querer actuar en una situación límite, es decir, como actuaría yo’ (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*) (‘[...] so in that situation she [Allende] makes you think, go deeper into what you

might think and how you want to react in an extreme situation, I mean, how I would react') or '[...] te pones a pensar realmente que es lo que sería para ti pasar por una situación así ¿no?' (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('[...] you start to think about how you would feel if you were in a similar situation, don't you?'). Once more these comments can also be understood in the context of the importance granted to characters by readers since:

the novelistic character, in turn, is a prism for interrogation of self, other selves and society beyond the text. Responses to characters show complex processes of self-definition at work as individuals explore their reactions and those of other members. On the simplest level, the women in reading groups relate to characters through identification and self-recognition (Long, 1986:606).

Long's accounts about the processes of identification and self-recognition occurring during her research with women reading groups in America appear to be the mechanisms women readers employed while reading *Paula*. Furthermore, these are similar to Ang's melodramatic identifications already discussed in chapters four and five. In this respect, both Ang's and Long's mechanisms are not exclusive to female readers' responses to *Paula* but seem to fit into the wider picture produced by both female and male readers' responses to characterization. More important, though, is to recognise that being able to identify with or distance themselves from characters constitutes a key factor for understanding British and Spanish readers' enjoyment when reading Allende as well as for explaining her popularity. Popularity, here, understood in the sense of how certain features (that is, Allende's characters) are salient to particular groups of women readers as already highlighted in chapter five.

The Influence of ‘Extra-Literary’ Discourses on Readers’ Responses to Allende’s *Paula*

What this section aims to demonstrate is how British and Spanish readers produced and consumed certain images and discourses of Allende, not only by means of reading autobiographical representations like *Paula*, but also by drawing upon several other texts talking about the author and her work. These ‘extra-literary’ texts could take several shapes and forms: press and radio interviews, TV appearances, internet sites, promotional tours and lectures, publicity campaigns, film adaptations, book blurbs, and so forth. Unlike in chapter three, the discourses under discussion within this section are intended to shed light on specific readers’ responses. Some of the responses produced by the groups discussing *Paula* have revealed, more than any other responses, the extent to which the ‘extra-literary’ had influenced some of the British and Spanish readers’ readings and interpretations of such work. This, however, fits in with the generic blur surrounding the accounts of *Paula* where readers unproblematically move between fiction and non-fiction.

For example, some of the Marchamalo and Azuqueca readers, by taking at face value what Allende had written in *Paula*, described the author in the following terms:

Bibliotecaria: A mí me parece una mujer muy sincera porque no todo el mundo cuenta esas cosas entonces me parece una mujer que exterioriza muy bien sus sentimientos y que es muy valiente y que cuenta muy bien las cosas porque te da pie para que tú te las creas, luego tú te las puedes creer o no (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 1, Hija de la fortuna).

Librarian [woman]: She [Allende] seems to me a very honest person because not everybody talks about these things, so she seems to me to be a woman who expresses very well her feelings

and who's very brave and tells you things very well so you can believe them, whether you actually believe them or not

En *Paula*, ahí he descubierto la Isabel Allende como persona, una persona que estaba como decir al desnudo, sus sentimientos a flor de piel, los más íntimos, los detalles de cómo conoció al americano, cuenta la vida sentimental de su hija, y hasta contó el encuentro con su yerno, ella le pide al yerno que le deje que se lleve a su hija (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

In *Paula*, I have discovered Isabel Allende as a person, a person who you might say was naked, her feelings out in the open even the most intimate ones, details about how she met the American, she talks about her daughter's personal relationships and even talks about the encounter with her son-in-law, she [Allende] asks her son-in-law to let her take her daughter with her.

What the above comments seem to have in common is that both similarly refer – although not always in an explicit way – to Allende's honesty and openness. As seen in chapter three, these qualities are those that also characterised Allende's construction when publicly talking about the loss of her daughter and subsequent depression. Moreover, this sense of intimacy also seemed maintained by those press accounts where the author shared a great deal of detail about her family relationships including marriages, divorces or love affairs. In this context, it therefore makes sense that readers' responses may have been inadvertently influenced and informed by the discourses that are prevalent outside Allende's fiction, given that she seems to be encouraging and constantly reproducing this close relationship between what she writes and who she really is. In the British context, similar comments about the author's honesty seemed to surface:

C: Isn't it uncanny how open she is to the reader? Everything, her secret thoughts, everything about her feelings and all the things that went on. She's so open, I mean, she's left nothing untold. (Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*).

And in response to the above, reader A added:

A: Yes it's true; she described a scene where a man was fondling her and not many people even if it had happened to you would

have wanted to write about that, I thought that was so honest, most people wouldn't want to write that (Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*).

What these comments suggest was a fascination - verging on incredulity – with how honest the author felt to them as readers. It is interesting to note how reader C from Birmingham Reading Group 1 used the word ‘uncanny’ to describe Allende’s honesty. It seems as if this reader may have found Allende’s sincerity suspicious as she may have felt it was implausible to get to know the “real” author simply through her work, perhaps implicitly recognising that to a certain degree, Allende’s accounts in *Paula* had been fictionalised.

Another interesting example of the ‘extra-literary’ impinging on readers’ responses to *Paula* was Allende’s radio interview *Devout Sceptics* (Radio 4, 10 September 2002). This radio interview underpinned the readers’ discussion in Southwell Reading Group by creating another powerful set of discourses for readers to draw upon. The following excerpts are taken from the opening comments made by the person who had listened and recorded the radio interview:

A: She [Allende] was on the radio, I got her on tape.

Rest of the group: Oh !!!

A: And I really enjoyed that as well and she talks a lot about Paula because the programme is called *Devout Sceptics*, it’s about beliefs, her reflection about Catholicism and how she’s joined another group of women and meet regularly and pray, they communicate together and she was talking about believing in what some people would call “positive thinking” and what she was doing will have an impact somewhere else completely different [...] also what she was saying is that she rejected Catholicism, she rejected it because she didn’t believe in it, it was a club she did not want to become part of but she appreciated the form, the ritual and all the rest of it but now it’s the other way round, she does not need the form, the ritual, now she begins to appreciate what’s underneath because she got so hooked on things such as how the

priest could be telling you about contraception, that made her so angry that she lost a bit of her spirituality.

(Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*).

In this instance, Allende's image of her rather problematic relationship with the Catholic religion and her search for spiritual refuge in women's prayer groups did probably mediate some of the readers' interpretations of *Paula*⁶⁷. For example, when the group discussed what was the book's message all readers agreed about its being 'a sort of spiritual quest' or 'It's something about the sort of transitory nature of life and the way everything is interconnected in life' (Reader A, Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*)⁶⁸. This kind of conclusion seems to be rather influenced by the overall theme of the radio interview that appeared to unveil Allende's connections and views on religion and spirituality. Also, towards the end of the meeting, the same reader who had listened and taped the radio interview admitted that she would have enjoyed *The House of the Spirits* if at the time she had known all about Allende's spiritual side: 'I found it [*The House of the Spirits*] very difficult to relate to, certain elements or experiences, I would have enjoyed the book now, knowing all I know' (Reader A, Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*).

So far, the examples examined in this section have dealt with *Paula*. Nonetheless, this does not necessarily mean that there were no other 'extra-literary' discourses at work influencing readers' responses. Among some groups,

⁶⁷ During the course of the meeting, there were several other references to the radio interview. Group members for example commented how Allende was making sense of Paula's signs after her death. In particular, reader A explained that through a defective candle Allende knew that Paula was communicating with her.

⁶⁸ This reading group was the only one that followed what they named the 'Book Club Questions'. Group members explained that these questions were sometimes used to structure their discussion but that they were not always followed consistently. The questions were always the same for each of the books read. The question that produced the comments discussed above was the following: 'What the book is really about/ its theme(s)?'

there was an explicit mention of having used Internet sources to find out more about Allende and her works. For example, in Nottingham Library the librarian shared with the group that she had visited and read a good number of web pages and in particular mentioned that *The House of the Spirits* had obtained very good reviews when it was first published. Also, in the Bingham Book Group, one of the readers shared that *The House of the Spirits* had been written under special circumstances, that is, the death of Allende's grandfather.

This practice of consulting the Internet, though, appears to be consistent with the self-identity British groups seek to project about themselves. As already discussed in chapter two, most British groups' self-identity as "serious" as well as possessing legitimate cultural competence seems once more to be reinforced by their Internet practices. It seems that group members implicitly understand that reading a book is not enough. Some British readers may feel they need to go beyond reading as pure entertainment since being part of a reading group implies taking on board other practices such as expanding their knowledge about the author and his/her work. This knowledge acquisition may, in turn, satisfy some of the anxieties certain readers may experience, since the reading and discussion of a designated book may not be perceived as sufficient to increase their 'cultural capital'. Nonetheless, for the same reason, with the plethora of information about the writer's private life, the Internet may have helped to create a bigger appetite to get to know the "real" author, acting as a response to the demands celebrity culture surreptitiously imposes on readers. What readers in this research may not be aware of, is that this obsession and fascination with the author's private self, may have transformed them into celebrity fans, although they would rather see themselves as 'pursuing an interest in an artist rather than a

celebrity, in order to locate themselves on a slightly higher plane of cultural consumption' (Turner, 2004:18).

This insatiable search for the "true" Isabel Allende, although not always overtly displayed by the examples produced by readers and the Internet, was nonetheless visible when readers asked me questions at the end of the meetings. This was perfectly justifiable as I was representing a reliable source of cultural authority who could help them expand their knowledge, not only about the author's works but also about her private life. According to Long, readers when they choose and discuss their books are '[...] in complex dialogue with various incarnations of cultural authority [...]' (Long, 1986:594) which could range from 'independent bookstores, booksellers, book reviews in literary magazines, literary awards, annual lists of notable books, best-seller lists, and universities' syllabi' (*ibid*: 600). For example, reader D from the Birmingham Reading Group 1 said: 'I'm dying to ask María to tell us later what happened to Willie and the rest of it' (Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*) and towards the end of the meeting different readers asked me the following questions about the "real" Allende: 'What is she doing now?'; 'Is she still writing?'; 'Is she still with Willie?'; 'Is she still in California?'; 'And what happened to Willie's children?'; 'Which husband is she on at the moment?'. This group of readers got even more interested in finding out about Allende when I told them I had the opportunity to meet her personally in Cambridge. More questions emerged about her personality and appearance: 'You've met her, is she likeable?'; 'Did you speak to her in Spanish?', 'How old is she?.' It is interesting to note that most questions above, except two, had nothing to do with Allende's literary career but her private self. This again reveals the importance these readers attached to the

search for the author's "real" self, rather than her skills as a writer. However, this kind of search was, to a certain degree, encouraged by the 'extra-literary' discourses that these readers seem to have been consuming about the author. This also suggests that there are no longer clear divides between the author's life and her work and, if there are, these are hard to find in Allende's case.

Interestingly, in the men only British group and in which a different book from *Paula* was read, all the questions asked about Isabel Allende had to do with issues regarding her literary production rather than her private life. For example, I was asked the following: 'Where was *The House of the Spirits* first published?'; 'Where did Isabel Allende write the book? Is it in exile?'; 'When did she start writing the book?'; 'Is this her first novel?'; 'How important is she considered as a writer in Spain?'. As already noted, these more "literary" oriented questions were asked by the only men reading group in this research and therefore rather than having been prompted by their reading choice, they were rather the result of the group's gender and the self-identity which these readers sought to project of themselves. This may well be caused by this group's eagerness to set themselves apart from other types of group or club since according to Long members will show 'condescension or even contempt for other kinds of social gatherings (garden clubs, card groups) that have no "cultural content"' (1987: 309).

Another example showing this time how Allende's novels had been mediated emerged when Birmingham Reading Group 2 and Lincoln Reading Group made comments on the blurbs which appear on the back cover of Allende's books. According to these readers, these blurbs projected an image of her fiction that could be rather misleading:

C: Reading the back cover of *The House of the Spirits* and *Of Love and Shadows*, they sound very similar to me, I mean I haven't read

it [*Of Love and Shadows*] but it seems the same territory, well without reading the book it is a bit unfair to say that (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

A: I've seen the book in the bookshops, I knew of the name but I have to say that every time I have picked one up and read the blurb on the cover, completely put me off reading it because it didn't seem to reflect anything that was in the inside (Lincoln Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

What the above readers' comments appear to highlight is that the discourses Allende's publishers and marketing professionals may have thought were enticing for the potential reader seemed to have produced the opposite effect as the blurbs seemed just to discourage rather than invite readers to engage with a first or even a second novel by Allende. In fact, *The House of the Spirits* 1986 Black Swan edition publishers' blurb - and to which most British readers referred given that this is the edition most bookshops sell - reads as follows:

Spanning four generations, Isabel Allende's magnificent family saga is populated by a memorable, often eccentric cast of characters. Together, men and women, spirits, the forces of nature, and of history, converge in an unforgettable, wholly absorbing and brilliantly realised novel that is as richly entertaining as it is a masterpiece of modern literature.

If for a moment we remember the comments made by British readers about characters in chapters four and five, it makes sense that the above readers may have felt unenthusiastic about the prospects of reading about an 'eccentric cast of characters'. Since characterization appears to be a key element for readers judging from the attention given to Allende's characters in previous chapters, publishers should pay careful attention to how to "sell" this aspect successfully for a given audience. In the context of British readers, if to the characters' eccentricity are added 'the spirits, the forces of nature and of history', the prospective British reader ends up with a rather disconcerting cocktail. This mix would, perhaps, attract an adventurous type of reader for its promise of

unconventionality, but more likely it would deflect the interest of a more conservative type of reader. Perhaps, with British readers, *The House of the Spirits* would have felt more inviting if characters had only been qualified by the adjective 'memorable'. This would have been a safer option alongside the appeal family sagas hold according to Bridgwood's (1986) arguments discussed earlier on. In addition to this, the word 'spirits' was possibly another uninviting choice, especially in combination with the tangible approach that 'forces of history' suggest. What this implies is that some of the British readers who took part in this project would have never considered reading a novel by Allende if they just had the blurbs as their basis of choice. Nonetheless, bearing in mind what has been discussed so far in this section, there are several other factors which may also play a decisive role in driving readers' reading choices in a particular direction.

Moving to the Spanish context, what is rather interesting is that little was commented about Allende's literary career or private life. This could be happening since most Spanish readers have known about Allende's personal affairs and have been following her literary achievements due to the considerable media coverage and exposure she has received in Spain over the years. Nonetheless, in the Fontanar group and in the context of *Paula*, one of the readers shared with the rest of the group the following comments about the author:

Había dos enfermeras que estaban trabajando en Madrid durante el ingreso de Paula y a ella la recuerdan [Allende] como excéntrica, exigente claro que tenía mucho que exigir al servicio que nunca reconoció que había metido la pata, ni asumió una serie de cuidados y la tenían en la UVI, y las horas de visita hay que entrar con mascarilla y con bata y ella entraba y hablaba con su hija y de pronto cuando tenía calor se quitaba la bata, se quitaba el jersey, se quedaba en sujetador y claro la gente en aquellos tiempos se

llevaba las manos a la cabeza y decían “esta tía está loca”, yo creo que es una persona con personalidad, que la experiencia de la vida que ha tenido como ella nos cuenta en *La casa de los espíritus* y que le ha dado la suficiente libertad como para a veces romper con la norma (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

*There were two nurses who were working in Madrid while Paula was hospitalised and they remembered her [Allende] as eccentric and demanding, of course she had a lot to demand of the [medical] service which never recognised that it made a mistake and didn't give her all the right treatment; Paula was in the ICU and during visiting hours you need to enter with a face mask and gown and she [Allende] would enter and talk to her daughter and suddenly when she felt hot she would take off her gown, her sweater, she would be left in her bra and of course at the time people were shocked and would say: “This woman is crazy”, I believe that she's [Allende] a person with personality, that the life experiences she tells us about in *The House of the Spirits* have given her enough freedom to break the rules sometimes.*

The above comment is another good example of the ongoing mediation of Isabel Allende's public image. What it confirms, nonetheless, is that the same fascination and curiosity to unveil who Allende really is, is also present with Spanish readers. Interestingly, the above comment highlights how she is being perceived in terms of a “strong” and determined woman who is not afraid of trespassing imposed boundaries. Again this perception of Allende is possibly the result of an accumulation of a series of ‘extra-literary’ discourses available in the public domain, which have constructed Allende in such terms, as already seen in chapter three when discussing the personality traits that the Spanish press chose to draw attention to. However, this is not all that there is to it. As the Fontanar reader claims, such “strong” personality transpires through her own fictional work, in particular through *The House of the Spirits*. This reader's inference appears to confirm what Ramblado (2003) has claimed regarding Allende's use of ‘different levels of simulation’ (2003: 31) in her works. The use of simulation, therefore, seems to influence the ways in which some readers

construct Allende's images since they not only engage with the information available in the public domain, but also with the 'self-referential' (*ibid*) nature of her work. As Ramblado explains, this happens in Allende because 'she has always played with the boundaries between autobiography and fiction' (*ibid*) and this is what British and Spanish readers' comments have shown throughout the course of this chapter.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the importance of readers' genre expectations in order to make sense of their interpretations of Allende's *Paula*. Given that *Paula* was read mainly within autobiographical parameters, both British and Spanish readers expected Allende's accounts to be truthful even when some readers had recognised certain fictional elements within them. Also, readers' truth claims were sustained by Allende's 'simulation of identity' (Ramblado, 2003) which helped create a blur between her fictional and public persona.

This chapter has also highlighted how close or distant women readers felt to Allende's character in *Paula*. The different subject positions adopted by British and Spanish women readers showed the various degrees of identification these women readers experienced in relation to Allende. Within these different identification processes, these readers strongly criticised her and subsequently distanced themselves specifically in her roles as mother and wife. As noted earlier on in this chapter, the distancing experienced by these women readers was also intensified by the difficult task for readers of reconciling Allende's private

and public domains. Also, certain tensions emerged in the way some readers interpreted Allende's use of her most private and difficult moments during her daughter's illness as a means of promoting herself in the literary world.

This chapter also turned to examine readers' fascination with Allende's "true" self and how different 'extra-literary' discourses about Allende – like the press discourses, the radio interview in the Southwell reading group, the Internet sources and the book blurbs - may have shaped readers' perceptions and interpretations of her work. This section particularly emphasized in the context of some reading groups the implications contemporary celebrity culture brings to the creation of literary celebrity and how readers' intense curiosity for the private lives of writers obliterates any boundaries between the writer's private and public selves.

Chapter Seven

British and Spanish Readers' Responses to the Historical and 'Magical' in Allende

Introduction

This chapter analyses British and Spanish readers' responses to the historical and the 'magical' in Allende. As with characterisation, this chapter explores how readers' concept of the historical is underpinned by realist claims that ultimately seek to evaluate Allende's work in terms of "truth" and therefore as "real". It further examines the significance readers attach to the historical as a means of justifying the act of reading under an 'ideology of instruction and self-improvement' (Long, 1987:319).

This chapter also examines the different readers' responses to the 'magical' in *The House of the Spirits*. Although initially regarded as independent from each other, both the historical and the 'magical' are connected by some British readers who understand the 'magical' as an obstacle for historical processes to take place. This chapter, then, explores how some British readers also consider the 'magical' as a breach of their generic expectations and how the different approaches held by British and Spanish readers to the 'magical' may have been influenced by cultural traditions specific to each of the research contexts.

The Historical In Allende

a) The Historical: a Means to Appraise Allende’s Novels as “Truth”

As when Allende’s characters were discussed in previous chapters, British and Spanish readers’ notion of the historical seems to be underpinned by realist claims that ultimately seek to fulfil the mimetic pact. In this sense, the historical functions as an aid to claim verisimilitude, that is, ‘what the dominant culture believes to be the case, to what is generally accepted as credible, suitable and proper’ (Gledhill, 1997: 360). The meanings British and Spanish readers attach to the historical in Allende could therefore be explained within the framework of ‘common sense’ realism⁶⁹ especially when readers claim that: ‘También al encuadrarla en unos hechos históricos, le da más credibilidad, te la hace más real la novela’ (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la fortuna*) (‘Also when it [the novel] is framed within some historical facts, it makes it more credible, it makes the novel more real to you’). With *The House of the Spirits*, some readers also make claims for the novel’s “truth” and realistic status by identifying some of the historical events represented in the novel: ‘Yo creo que es bastante real porque precisamente bombardearon el palacio, eso es cierto’ (Biblioteca de Guadalajara 2, *La casa de los espíritus*) (‘I think it is quite real [*The House of the Spirits*] because they really did bomb the palace’). This view is also shared by literary critics who, like Marcelo Coddou, suggest that:

la novela [...] acierta grandemente en crear la atmósfera y en recoger hechos significativos de lo que aconteciera en el Historia.

⁶⁹ The notion of ‘common sense’ realism does not refer to the aesthetic realm of realism but to how certain conceptions of realism become ‘internalized, conventionalized and sedimented in every day life’ (OUP, 1981:88-89).

Y esto desde la mera mención de sucesos, algunos de efectiva trascendencia – hasta el desarrollo en detalle de muchos otros (Coddou, 1988: 159).

The novel [...] is very effective in creating the atmosphere and collecting important facts about what happened in History. And this is done by simply mentioning some events, some of real importance, - or by developing many others in detail.

Besides, some readers referred to media accounts to confirm Allende’s faithful historical representations in *The House of the Spirits*: ‘It’s true to a society she talks about, the end part is very much parallel to the events described in the newspapers’ (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*) or similarly in the Spanish context:

Sí totalmente *La casa de los espíritus* nos ha retratado una época como muy realista, según informes que hemos visto en televisión o lo que hemos oído, desde luego en el libro está reflejado, ella no se lo ha inventado yo creo, sino que es la realidad y así es y así lo ha contado (Biblioteca de Guadalajara 1, *La casa de los espíritus*).

Yes, The House of the Spirits has absolutely portrayed a very realistic period, according to the television reports that we have seen, or what we’ve heard; in the book this is certainly represented, she hasn’t made it up I think, rather it’s the truth, and that’s the way it is and that’s how she’s told it.

These comments do not recognise Allende’s subjective reading and construction of reality. On the contrary, Allende’s historical references are taken at face value without problematising her rewriting of history. Perhaps, readers’ trust in Allende’s particular version of Chilean history resides in the production and consumption of ‘extra-literary’ discourses that, as seen in chapter three, have situated her close to Salvador Allende and Chile’s “official” history, allowing her to speak from a position of truth and authority.

b) The Presence and Absence of Temporal and Space Markers: Its Impact on Situating Readers' Readings of Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and *Eva Luna*

Another set of features that British and Spanish readers identified as ensuring accuracy, veracity and truthfulness to reality and history was Allende's use of temporal and space markers in *Daughter of Fortune*⁷⁰ and *Paula*: 'Es muy interesante, donde la ubica, las fechas' (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la Fortuna*) ('It is very interesting where she [Allende] sets the novel, the dates'); 'If I was reading it again, I would have a piece of paper with me to keep a record of where she was and the dates' (Reader E, Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*); 'It takes place in all these countries, Chile, Peru, Lebanon, California, Spain, Argentina and Venezuela, I think this is all correct, isn't it?' (Reader A, Birmingham Reading Group 1, *Paula*). Simple references to time and space may increase the illusion of a transparent relationship between reality, history and fiction, whereas confronted with the lack of them, some British readers experienced confusion about situating *The House of the Spirits*:

A: Did you realise it was Chile?

C: Yes, I think I realised getting half way through, I began to think what country is this? I thought it was Argentina at the start. It was very subtly done; it was very difficult to *date it* (my emphasis) most of the time (Bingham Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

For the above Bingham readers, it is not obvious that the novel is set in Chile; in fact, the setting of *The House of the Spirits* is believed to be Argentina. This

⁷⁰ In *Daughter of Fortune* (1999), Isabel Allende divides her narrative into three parts with solely temporal markers: Primera Parte 1843-1848; Segunda Parte 1848-1849; Tercera Parte 1850-1853. Similarly in *Paula* (1996), Allende divides her fictionalised memoirs in Primera Parte Diciembre 1991-Mayo 1992; Segunda Parte Mayo-Diciembre 1992 and Epílogo Navidad de 1992.

partly contradicts Catherine Boyle's (1995) opening paragraphs of her article *Frameworks and Context in La casa de los espíritus: A Chronicle of Teaching*. Boyle claims that although 'the country is never named' so 'it could be any country in Latin America, the reader aware of Chilean culture and history will recognize it through the language, through cultural references and through the historical incidents portrayed' (Boyle, 1995: 105). Boyle's assumptions are, perhaps, rather ambitious in assuming that readers would recognise Chile through all the cultural and historical references that appear in the novel. This does not work for all readers of Allende as suggested by the Bingham readers. These readers may have finally discovered that the setting of *The House of the Spirits* was Chile, but this was more than likely the result of readers accessing 'extra-literary' information about the novel in the Internet⁷¹. This suggests on the one hand that the Bingham readers, in order to understand, follow and get involved with the story, were not forced by the text itself to find out about the exact historical settings. In fact, thinking that the setting was Argentina instead of Chile did not prevent them from getting involved with the story and enjoying it.

On the other hand, the use of 'extra-literary' sources by some British readers also reveals how they perceive their reading practices, not only as a pleasurable way to discuss a common read among friends, but also, as a means of furthering their knowledge by researching what they read, as already discussed in chapter seven.

⁷¹ One member in the Bingham group revealed that she had looked up information about Isabel Allende on the Internet to help her understand the novel better.

The following conversation among some of Nottingham Reading Group 2 readers concerning *Eva Luna's* unclear Latin American settings is another example that illustrates readers' confusion when confronted with the lack of obvious chronological and spatial clues:

A: My geography is hazy, my Latin American history is non-existent

B: I think it's not meant to be specific anywhere, is it?

Rest of the group members: No, no

A: But the German thing is so specific, isn't it? And so real

C: But the Latin American is specific, I think it's Argentina, isn't it? Even the German bit, she's [Allende] often making a bit of a statement how awful it was

A: And this when reality comes in, that's when it does, crashing through, and yet the Chilean political equivalent when you knew it was crashing, you knew there were political prisoners taken, you knew the regime was brutal, but somehow you treated it in a more light hearted way

D: Yes, I know what you say, you could feel, you could experience the German brutality

A: You knew, you were told it was brutal

C: But the South American were covered up, hidden whereas the concentration camps were known, I mean many people in Germany knew what was happening and was almost accepted, whereas in Chile I think it was much more under cover, people disappeared, no one would know what happened to them, so in a way that situation was there, she's writing the parallel of the European version.

(Nottingham Reading Group 2, *Eva Luna*)

Some of the above Nottingham readers were willing to admit that the historical knowledge they possessed about the Second World War and the role Germany played in it, was not comparable to their 'non-existent' Latin American equivalent. It is therefore not strange that this group of readers were unable to situate *Eva Luna* within the historical context of the Venezuelan dictatorships of

Juan Vicente Gómez (1910-1931) and Marco Pérez Jiménez (1950-1958), as well as the period of guerrilla movements (1960-1965) (Gálvez-Carlisle, 1991:170). Instead, they opted to locate geographically the story within Argentina or Chile, vaguely alluding to its socio-historical context. Nonetheless, readers' confusion about the novel's setting or socio-historical contexts did not stop them from getting involved in the story. What is important in these comments is readers' recognition of the German situation the novel represented and its truthfulness. It appears that the German references in the novel come "alive" to these readers because they feel closer to them. Closer, in the sense that they may have formed part of some readers' family histories - some members in the group commented about how they remember their grandparents' stories about the war - or just simply because they are and have been part of British "official" history. This closeness and recognition of events led to readers feeling emotionally involved with the German part of the story as 'you could experience the German brutality' at an emotional level. What becomes remarkable is how the German brutality serves readers to understand in comparative terms its Latin American equivalent in the form of the 'disappeared' in Chile and Argentina. Although this group of readers may experience difficulty in relating to the events specific to the Latin American situation - maybe due to the geographical and cultural distance that separates them from Latin America - they still endeavour to connect with Latin American brutality by means of situating its European equivalent as a point of reference.

c) Characters Acting as Metaphors of Historical Change

Some Leicester readers found Allende’s characters to be the key to understand the historical change represented in the novel:

E: I was interested in the characters, in what was happening next, in their relationships and it was only because I was interested in capturing what was going to happen to this or the other person that then I started to perceive that there were also changes happening to the country; because I was interested in individual characters, in their family history, in the news of themselves, that I also started to get a sense of the historical process, of historical change (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

Perhaps, one of the characters who would best fit the purpose assigned to characters acting as metaphors of historical change would be Esteban Trueba. In his role as authoritarian *patrón*, he represents the oppressor in the family, and by extension, the authoritarian regime, the nation’s oppressor. Thus, this Leicester reader may have perceived the historical changes of Chile culminating in the 1973 coup through Trueba’s parallel escalation of abuse, power and violence. Nonetheless, Trueba’s authoritarian image is softened in the narrative when Allende allows him to repent: ‘he admits his mistake and laments the passing of the peaceful and democratic Chile he had known into the hands of butchers and criminals’ (Boyle, 1995:110). This representation is, however, rather problematic for Boyle since Trueba’s sudden transformation brings implications for Allende’s readers’ readings since we are not only asked to forget about what Trueba represents but also about his part in backing the usurpation of power by the military.

Once more I found Boyle’s arguments rather fascinating in particular because as seen in the previous section, she makes assumptions about Allende’s “ordinary” readers in the context of the historical framework that Allende’s novel

represents that are particularly useful for approaching readers' readings of the historical in this thesis.

In relation to Trueba, Boyle further claims that his repentance has also an effect on Allende's refiguring of time. Boyle's arguments are prompted by Allende's own view that literature imposes 'an order in words that is false and artificial' (*ibid*, 109). In the "real" world things may not necessarily happen in the same sequence imposed by literature, that is, by organising the chaotic occurrence of events, literature employs a 'false chronology of words' which does not necessarily correspond to the 'real chronology of history' (*ibid*, 110). In this respect, Boyle's main concern rests on the idea that Allende allows Trueba and those of his kind to be part of the 'false chronology of words' and not part of the 'real chronology of history' (*ibid*). What this means is that Allende, by first representing Trueba in his role as paternalistic *patrón* taking justice into his own hands, makes readers believe and trust Trueba's representation as "real" and part of history, but by showing his repentance, she also denies readers a 'real memory of Esteban Trueba' (*ibid*). It seems that Allende had excused and forgiven Trueba for his responsibility in the making of the Chilean authoritarian regime and according to Boyle, this bears unforeseen consequences for readers' interpretations. As discussed in chapter five, some of these unforeseen consequences are palpable in the ways some British and Spanish readers seemed to have fallen prey to the charms of Trueba's new self as a changed man, completely regretful of his actions; since by vindicating him, readers were inexorably absolving those who historically abused power by alleging as Sharon Magnarelli (1990) that 'times were difficult'. In Magnarelli's own words:

If we are to exonerate Esteban for his earlier abuses on his basis of his defence that times were difficult, we must exonerate all who

abuse power, oppressors who inevitably state, both inside and outside the novel, that their use of force is a temporary means of overcoming a difficult situation (1990: 53-54).

Nonetheless, and after all this criticism directed at Trueba's characterization, Boyle ends her analysis in a rather conciliatory tone, also recognising that this was the way in which Allende wanted to represent Trueba although his final transformation meant compromising the novel's historical framework.

Presumably, the whole of Boyle's arguments aim at presenting the only possible reading of *The House of the Spirits* as one which does not 'move beyond the confines of the framework of the text' (1995: 111), that is, one that does not interpret this narrative within the context of history. However, as Boyle asked herself at the beginning of her article 'Does the "ordinary" reader need to know that the book is about Chile and that the final moment of history that frames the entire narrative is the military coup of 1973?' Perhaps the answer to Boyle's question would be 'no'. Not knowing its "real" historical framework does not seem to have prevented the readers in this thesis from experiencing the novel as a pleasurable read or getting involved with the text.

Another characteristic of Allende's refiguring of time in *The House of the Spirits* and also a cause for concern for Boyle is the temptation of its circularity

which equalizes all the characters in the face of a greater order of things, and we are asked to trust this, have faith in it, accept it, just as we are asked to accept Clara's clairvoyance. This is possible within a parallel reality, a replacing of one history by a fiction (Boyle, 1995:111).

Boyle's concerns about Allende's readership's blind trust in her preordained world, its circularity and annulment of the Chilean historical processes, appeared to have been challenged by the "ordinary" reader in this research who does not

participate in Allende's 'reinterpretation of the world' so easily as Boyle suspects:

A: At the end, she seems to almost say that life comes round in circles and there's inevitability about things, that it was inevitable that Esteban's illegitimate son should be the avenger; it was inevitable that the granddaughter should be strong. I wasn't sure but it seemed that she was trying to make a profound statement but the book itself doesn't make me feel like that, it seems all more erratic to me, all these things happening or not, people turning out the way they were, *I wasn't convinced by that* (my emphasis) (Nottingham Library, *The House of the Spirits*).

It is important to stress that the above comment is not representative of all of the British and Spanish readers in this research, but at least, it appears to indicate that some of Allende's readers possess the ability to be critical and identify similar pitfalls to those presented by the literary critic. As suggested earlier on in this chapter, Boyle's claims that faith and trust in Allende's particular vision of the world can be dangerous is being challenged when some readers also critical of Allende's 'reinterpretation of the world' suspend their trust in her construction of Chilean history. Perhaps, the fact that this criticism about Allende's preordained world emerges in one of the British groups as well as in the work of a British scholar, may be indicative of the ways in which British cultural traditions interpret concepts such as destiny or preordination. Such concepts appear to be underpinning Allende's vision of the world and according to the author herself, Anglophone traditions compared to Latin American - and by extension Spanish - traditions are less fatalistic regarding the control individuals exercise on their own lives. In Anglophone traditions individuals appear to be 'very much in charge of their lives'⁷² and maybe for that reason Allende's preordained and

⁷² Holt, Pat, 2001. *Onstage with Isabel Allende, Part II* [online]. Available from: <http://www.holtuncensored.com/members/column290.html> [Accessed on 13 April 2007]

fixed version of events forces some British readers to feel suspicious of her version of history in *The House of the Spirits* as noted by the Nottingham Library reader's insightful views.

d) The Value Readers Attach to the Historical

Some Spanish readers also found the historical elements in Allende 'attractive' and 'entertaining':

Para mí personalmente me parece importante el elemento histórico porque hace más atractivo lo que escribe, entonces lo que nos cuenta después sea más novela o menos novela, pues me lo hace mucho más ameno y más atractivo; los apuntes históricos que se van dando en este libro, la fiebre del oro y cómo te ambienta California y todo (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2, *Hija de la fortuna*).

Personally I think the historical element is important because it makes what she writes more attractive, so afterwards what she [Allende] tells us might be more or less fictional, but to me it makes it much more entertaining and attractive; the historical references that come up in this book, the gold rush, how she represents the atmosphere in California and everything.

Yo creo que los libros que mezclan historia, política y novela, todos son muy entretenidos; también será una forma de ella pero con sus vistas también un poco comerciales, yo no sé si ella pensó que lo iba a hacer así, a mí me encantan porque por lo menos te inquietan un poquito a pensar y vas a buscar cosas, de quién estuvo en ese país [en el poder], cómo lo hizo y eso da mucho de sí (Biblioteca de Guadalajara 1, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I think that books that mix history, politics and fiction, are all very entertaining; perhaps it is also her [Allende] way of doing things but with her slight commercial views in mind; I don't know if she thought that she was going to do it like this [but] I love them because at least they move you to think a bit and you go and look for things, who was in the country [in power], how they did it, and this gives you a lot.

The above readers' references to the entertaining and appealing qualities of the historical elements in Allende's novels should be understood in conjunction with terms such as 'instruction' or 'self-improvement' (Long, 1987:319) which

readers obtained through inhabiting ‘unknown’ settings as the following Spanish reader expressed:

Me han gustado los dos libros que hemos leído aquí porque te lleva a épocas que no conocemos, te metes dentro de esa época, que luego te va diciendo cosas que has oído, otras te suenan por la historia y te metes más adentro (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 1, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I liked both the books we have read here because they take you to periods you don't know about, you get yourself into that period, and then they tell you things that you've heard, other things that are familiar because of history and you get more into it.

This immersion in the ‘unknown’ as instructive is also pleasurable, that is, entertaining. According to Ang, (1985) who draws upon Bourdieu’s arguments on ‘The aristocracy of culture’, pleasure is derived from ‘an immediate emotional or sensual involvement with the object of pleasure’ and this is achieved because the object of pleasure offers a ‘possibility of identifying oneself with it in some way or other, to integrate it into everyday life’ (1985: 20). This situates realism back at the centre of this argument. These Allende readers must be able to find not only characters but also settings and plots plausible within the world described. Although readers may not have first hand experience of Allende’s historical settings, these are congruent within themselves and this is what ultimately makes them entertaining, attractive and pleasurable because Allende relies on readers’ recognition and involvement with them, as well as offering readers the possibility of expanding their knowledge and understanding of ‘unknown’ countries and peoples’ “real” histories:

A: I feel it made me understand better how it would be like to live in a society where things were so political and changed so much (Nottingham Library, *The House of the Spirits*).

He leído también la Hija de la fortuna y Retrato en sepia es como continuación de todo eso y habla sobre todo de la vida en Chile, de

cómo se vivía, de las inmigraciones, eso es lo que me gusta mucho (El Palo, La casa de los espíritus).

I have also read Daughter of Fortune and Portrait in Sepia is like a continuation of all that and she [Allende] talks about all and about her life in Chile, about how they lived, about immigration, that is what I liked a lot.

Some of the Spanish readers’ inadvertent emphasis on the instructive nature of Allende’s novels may be a reminiscence of the educational ethos some of these groups pursued when initially created as literacy groups. However, despite these groups’ influences when originally formed, what emerges from both British and Spanish readers’ comments is that although readers are being transported to worlds that are distant or different from their own – the nineteenth-century Californian gold rush in *Daughter of Fortune* or twentieth-century Chilean social and political history in *The House of the Spirits* - these are still imaginable. This is what makes Allende’s historical settings so appealing for British and Spanish readers. As with characters, readers are able to connect and get involved in the stories because although exotic, distant or different, characters, settings and historical references are still recognisable among readers. Moreover, not only readers’ recognition of Allende’s historical worlds makes Allende “popular”, but also for some readers her historical accounts bring successfully the ‘world of the text’ and the ‘world of the reader’ together (Ricoeur, 1988):

[...] es una historia como muy reciente en el tiempo, aparte se me venía a la cabeza cuando estábamos leyendo, es parte de la política, que cuando por ejemplo en la guerra que está habiendo ahora que todavía no está terminada, que por qué ha entrado Estados Unidos, que sí de acuerdo que Saddam Hussein es un dictador, a ese tío habría que cargárselo pero ¿cuántos dictadores hay y no van a cargárselos? ¿por qué van? Por el petróleo, y en Chile pasó igual, y es que no entiendo mucho de política, pero la idea ligera que yo tengo es que Estados Unidos apoyó a Pinochet y por lo que tengo entendido todas las cosas que tenían en Chile de nitratos y de minas que eran muy importantes, todo fue absorbido

por los Estados Unidos, o sea, lo que te quiero decir es que una cosa de las de ahora, de estos días, lo he entendido por un estilo con lo que pasó en los años setenta (Biblioteca de Marchamalo, Paula).

[...] it's a very recent history time wise; besides, it struck me when we were reading, it's part of politics, for example in the war that's going on now and isn't over yet, why has the United States gone in? Ok, I agree Saddam Hussein is a dictator, that bloke should be killed, but how many other dictators there are and they don't go and kill them? Why are they going in? Because of the oil, and in Chile, the same thing happened; and I don't understand too much about politics, but I have a vague idea that the United States supported Pinochet and as far as I know all the things they had in Chile, nitrates and mines, that were really important, everything was swallowed up by the United States, so what I really want to say is something like what is happening today, I've understood to some extent through what happened in the seventies.

What really interests me from this reader's comment is how it shows Ricoeur's 'phenomenological psychology of reading' (Ricoeur, 1988:167) at its best, where the 'world of the text intersects or/and affects the world of the reader' (*ibid*). Not only this, Allende's readings can also be transformative as 'readers incorporate [...] into their vision of the world the lessons of their readings' (*ibid*, 179). This is happening as the above reader recognises that the United States' support for Pinochet's regime in Chile in the 1970s had a similar objective as with its intervention in Iraq. What moved the United States to get involved in both contexts was the securing and control over natural resources, namely the nitrates in Chile or the oil in Iraq. The above reader is therefore able to establish dialogues with a recent historical event by drawing upon and confronting Allende's own representations in *The House of the Spirits* with her own reader's world. This, in turn, is what makes Allende's writings so "popular" in the sense that readers find means to understand, confront and even transform their daily experiences and "real" life issues through their readings of Allende.

The Historical Versus the 'Magical' in *The House Of The Spirits*

There is an extensive body of literature (Roh, 1925; Flores, 1955; Leal, 1967; Pereira, 1976; Barroso, 1977; Bravo, 1988; Hart, 1989; Bautista, 1991; Villanueva and Liste, 1991; Angulo, 1995; Foreman, 1995, Varela Bran, 1996; Bennett, 1998) that over the years has attempted to define magical realism. However, any attempt to universally define this term could be considered flawed since 'ningún tratadista ha proporcionado una definición de realismo mágico que sea unánimamente aprobada' (Bautista, 1991:33) ('no critic has offered a definition of magical realism which had been unanimously agreed on'). Therefore given the complexities surrounding magical realism, I intend to arrive at a working definition suitable for the purpose of this thesis. In this respect, this section does not aim at mapping out all the debates which have contributed to the development of the term, but to situate readers' understanding of magical realism within the critical parameters that surround it.

Most studies on magical realism begin by acknowledging Franz Roh's use of this term to refer to the pictorial techniques of post-expressionism in 1925 (Barroso, 1977:14; Bravo, 1988:14; Bautista, 1991:18; Angulo, 1995:8; Leal 1995:120; Varela Bran, 1996:25). In addition, several critics highlight Ángel Flores (1955) and Luis Leal's (1967) works as main contributors to the initial debates on magical realism. Flores' work was challenged by Leal's, who not only disagreed with the authors Flores had included as magical realists but also with his identification of magical realism with fantastic, psychological or surrealist literature (1995: 121). For Leal in 'magical realism the writer

confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts' but 'it does not distort reality or create imagined worlds, as writers of fantastic literature or science fiction do' (*ibid*). I find Leal's distinction between fantastic literature and magical realism key to the understanding of the latter. However, despite Leal's efforts to settle for a definition of magical realism, his is still, according to María Elena Angulo (1995), 'vague' and 'ambiguous' (1995:6) although she recognises the importance of Leal's 'differentiation between fantastic and realistic literature which [...] is one of the main points to be considered in the discussion of magicorealist fiction' (*ibid*).

Some critics such as Fernando Alegría or Jaime Alazraki claim that the term 'lo real maravilloso' ('the marvellous real') coined by the Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier 'is the one that best defines magical realism' (Angulo 1995: 7; Bautista 1991: 28). In his in-depth study of 'realismo mágico' and 'lo real maravilloso', Víctor Bravo (1988) argues that over the years critics have adopted different positions and some have understood both terms as identical whereas others have tried to establish a difference between the two which has subsequently led to a re-definition of both terms to minimise ambiguity (1988: 221). But rather than seeing 'lo real maravilloso' as different or opposed to magical realism, Carpentier's concept equally maintains that the 'marvellous reality is *not fantastic* (my emphasis), based from the beginning on a nature with laws different from our own, but rather the events related weave a miraculous occurrence into rigorously everyday reality' (Hart, 1989:21). Similarly, in the words of Gloria Bautista:

En lo maravilloso, el narrador no inventa personajes fantásticos, externos de la realidad, sino que penetra en lo profundo de la

realidad para desentrañar sus misterios. Los misterios no están fuera de la realidad sino que son parte integrante de ella (Bautista, 1991:34).

In the marvellous, the narrator does not invent fantastic characters outside reality, but penetrates in the depths of reality to untangle its mysteries. These mysteries are not outside reality, but form an integral part of it.

What the words above suggest is that magical realism cannot be understood as a means to represent a reality that is unreal or fantastic. Perhaps, as Carpentier suggests, the difficulty in coming to terms with magical realism resides in our failure to perceive [Latin] American reality as part or as an extension of our same European reality: '[...] el objetivo del escritor es captar una realidad Americana que a los ojos del hombre europeo resulta fantástica' ('[...] the objective of the writer is to capture an American reality which in the eyes of the European man is seen as fantastic'). According to Carpentier, our 'blindness' only allows us to 'see' Latin American reality as unreal or fantastic (Bautista 1991:34).

For this reason, most British and Spanish readers equated Allende's magical realism to the 'magical', the 'airy-fairy' or the 'fantastic'. What the use of 'airy-fairy' or 'fantastic' nonetheless implies is that, in particular, some British readers did not distinguish between magical realism and the fantastic when, as just seen, this separation is fundamental for the understanding of magical realism. As seen earlier on, magical realism is associated with the fantastic, the marvellous and the supernatural but whereas the marvellous and the supernatural form part of what magical realism is, the fantastic does not.

In this respect, and by readers sometimes using the 'fantastic' as a means to refer to Allende's 'magical' world, they may be inadvertently implying that the 'magical' world described in Allende is part of a different reality, a reality that readers do not recognise or experience as "real" in a mimetic sense. What

the next sections address is whether 'the effect of reading Allende's magical realist fiction may be to change the readers' prejudices about what reality is' (Hart, 1989:27). In other words, how in Ricoeur's sense, magical realism may 'affect' and transform the readers' worlds by changing their perception of what reality is.

a) The 'Magical' as an Obstacle to the Development of Historical Processes

Despite the different terms readers used to refer to Allende's magical realism, one of the ways in which some British readers understood the 'magical' world in *The House of the Spirits* was as an obstacle for the historical processes to take place when referring to Chile's political developments in the following ways:

A: I think it was a bit overweighed with all these political dramas in the very last section, you didn't get a lot in a way, the background of it, particularly in earlier parts of the book, it was more about the relationships, the fantastic going on, and the family as it were, I didn't feel the political context come to life and then there was all there in the last section (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

This reader is signalling the changes occurring in the novel by demarcating the two parts⁷³, one she calls the 'fantastic' and the other the 'political'. The move from the 'fantastic' to the 'political' seems to be welcomed as the 'fantastic' has not served its purpose in foregrounding the 'political'. The 'fantastic' in this respect has been read as an obstacle to reach the political, and the above reader has not interpreted it as a metaphor for future political events. Similarly, Gabrielle Foreman (1995) has also argued that Allende's 'allegiance to the

⁷³ Although several British and Spanish readers differentiate two parts in *The House of the Spirits*, that is, before and after the 'magical', Isabel Allende does not explicitly recognise such division within the fourteen chapters that the novel is subdivided into.

political and historical' in *The House of the Spirits* is achieved by distancing from the 'magical' whenever Allende seeks to emphasise the historical moment (1995: 295). It is this distancing from the 'magical' that Foreman refers to, what this British reader perceives as a necessary precondition for the political and by extension the historical events to develop. However, not all readers in this Birmingham group agreed with reader A's views since another group member responded by saying:

C: But don't forget that Rosa dies because of political shenanigans, she was poisoned because of her father and then I think it would have turned people off if there had been too much politics at the beginning of the book, it would have been rather indigestible (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

This reader's comment is assigning a more positive role to the 'fantastic' microcosm of the family, which on this occasion offers in advance a taste for what the nation macrocosm has in store. Marcelo Coddou (1988) similarly maintains that several family anecdotes in *The House of the Spirits*, like Rosa's death, accumulate into a series of events whose culmination is the political upheaval of 1973.

b) The 'Magical': Breaching Readers' Generic Expectations

Several British and Spanish readers' readings of the 'magical' also suggest that the 'magical' caused the breaching of generic expectations:

F: The liberation theology actually happened, it's a constant background theme since it started in 1958, and there are constant references to world history actually but I didn't enjoy the book at all until about page two hundred, I was getting fed up with all the wonderful, weird and extraordinary doings, all I want is a bit of "ordinary" sense. That's how I feel and then all the story of

liberation theology which interested me and found it very rewarding (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

G: It’s difficult to know where all this fantastic levitation, flying of the stool and the spirits fits into a serious political drama and Rosa’s green hair, I found this quite bizarre (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

A: A mí por eso los libros cuando hablábamos de las excentricidades, cuando son demasiado excéntricas, no me gustan, a mí el pelo verde no me gusta porque estoy en una historia que me la empiezo a creer y el pelo verde en esa historia no me pega; es como si ponen al *Señor de los anillos* que todo es fantástico en el telediario; entonces una cosa que sí me creo es que hay personas excéntricas, que hay “Claros”, la casa de mi hermana en Sevilla es como esa [la casa de la esquina en *La casa de los espíritus*], para subir a la terraza y a la habitación de atrás hay que pasar por el baño como en *La casa de los espíritus* y luego nos reímos de la casa, pero entonces lo del pelo verde no me lo puedo creer (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

That’s why I, with the books when we talked about the eccentricities, when they are too eccentric, I don’t like them, I don’t like the green hair because I’m inside a story which I start to believe and the green hair does not fit within the story; it’s like The Lord of the Rings, that’s completely fantastic, appearing in the news, well something I do believe is that there are eccentric people, there are ‘Claros’, my sister’s house in Seville is like that [the corner house in The House of the Spirits], to get to the roof top and back room you have to go through the bathroom like in The House of the Spirits and so we laughed about the house, but then the green hair, I can’t believe it.

Since ‘the entire narrative of *La casa de los espíritus* is a device for the recounting of the story of the military coup’ (Boyle, 1995: 107), a historical event that is ‘backed up by documents and eyewitness accounts’ (Blowers, 2000: 110) and therefore “real” in a mimetic sense, readers find themselves confused about what purpose the ‘magical’ holds in the narrative. The ‘magical’ cannot share the same space with realistic accounts of Chilean socio-political history.

Another explanation that could also shed some light on readers' contempt towards the 'magical' might be Allende's constant 'placing of magical realism in trivial settings, ones that do little to affect the larger problems of contemporary Latin America' (Hart, 1989: 39). In this context, Patricia Hart's (1989) detailed analysis of Clara's clairvoyant and telekinetic powers in *Narrative Magic in the Fiction of Isabel Allende* have been illuminating for understanding readers' readings of magical realism. According to Hart, although some of Clara's predictions do not bear consequences for the public but the private sphere, they still do not assist in changing the course of events, that is, Clara's premonitions do not give way to action. Although Clara's clairvoyant qualities allow her to see what is to come, she does not proactively try to avoid catastrophes or family deaths, like her sister Rosa and Férula's. As Hart suggests, Clara remains untroubled throughout the novel letting misfortune take its own course as if there was no human agency that could be involved in changing the bleak future she is capable of seeing before anyone else can. What this leads to, is an understanding of Clara's clairvoyance or 'magical' powers in terms of 'determinism versus free will' (*ibid*, 46). This determinism as well as Clara's passivity - this quality was already discussed at length in chapter five - is perhaps what compels readers to see no purpose to the 'magical' within a story whose focus, and culminating point, rests on representing the harsh realities of the Chilean coup of 1973. As the Birmingham reader expressed: 'It's difficult to know where all this fantastic levitation, flying of the stool and the spirits fits into a serious political drama'.

Nonetheless, Clara's 'magical' world does not necessarily need to be interpreted in such negative light. Hart (1989) further claims that: 'The fact that Blanca and Clara are unable to liberate themselves from passivity and

manipulation is hardly a criticism of Allende's own feminism; rather it is a tribute to her honesty as a novelist' (1989:54). What Hart's analysis suggests is that Allende has endeavoured to be faithful to a period of Chilean social history where women's "real" lack of power was compensated for by clinging to what would be considered typically feminine qualities such as the intuitive powers carried by clairvoyance practices.

As discussed in chapter five, British and Spanish ambivalent relationships with Clara originated in a limited reading of her 'magical' qualities. Most British and Spanish readers saw Clara's 'magical' world as preventing her from fulfilling the typical feminine roles of dutiful mother and wife and not as a means of asserting her own individualism. As already discussed in this chapter, the 'magical' world is also perceived as an obstacle for the historical processes to finally materialise as well as offer readers the opportunity to forget about the trivial and engage in serious historical accounts. Nonetheless, some readers admit they would have found it hard to stick to the harsh realities of the Chilean coup and its aftermath from the very beginning:

Si hubiera empezado el libro con la dictadura pura y dura pues no sé si hubiera aguantado el libro. Suavemente te va introduciendo en el problema gordo que es donde te quiere meter, más que los espíritus, yo creo que lo que quiere retratar es el momento de la historia (Biblioteca de Guadalajara 1, *La casa de los espíritus*).

If the book had started with the pure dictatorial period, I don't know if I would have been able to stick to it. Slowly you are introduced to the big problem which is where she [Allende] wants you to be, more than the spirits, I believe that what she wants to represent is this moment in history.

It seems that the above reader sees the 'magical' as 'no more than a syrup which sweetens the bitter pill of worthy but unpalatable political history' (Bennett, 1998: 359) but according to Bennett, the 'magical' is 'neither a trivial enticement

to the reader' but has its structural function in the novel and when 'it diminishes in the story is when it no longer serves a useful social function for women' (*ibid*). This is manifested in the novel when Clara suddenly transforms herself and becomes this active woman prototype that in charge of *Las Tres Marías* fights against the disastrous consequences brought by the earthquake. This transformation was highlighted on many occasions by British and Spanish readers in chapter five and although pleasantly surprised by Clara's active role, readers, could not come to terms with this personality shift precisely because they did not identify the 'social function' Bennett claims - and I agree - that the 'magical' signified for Clara and other women in similar circumstances.

In contrast with the distinction most British readers established between the "real" and 'magical' nature of events, one of the Leicester readers understood the 'magical' in a completely different light:

E: I've always seen magic realism just as a view of reality really, just as a way of expressing a perception of reality which I take is coming from past experiences of different explanations of how common events are accepted rather than being a style, that has been invented by an imaginative person, I've seen it as a way of expressing the experience of living in South American society (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*)

Except for Leicester reader E, who appears to have understood magic realism as I do, that is, as a different way of representing reality, accepting it as another realistic means of representation, most British readers see this type of representation as an obstacle to relate to the reality they know about. For these same readers the boundaries between the 'magical' and the "real" must be fixed and not fluid. In this respect, *The House of the Spirits* destabilises readers' generic expectations making their relationship with the text problematic as already discussed earlier on. What this comment also seems to suggest is that the

interpretation this man reader made about magical realism fits in within the more scholarly self-identity that the Leicester group revealed compared to the other British groups in this research.

Similarly, some Spanish readers also found that a realistic representation could coexist with a non-realistic or 'magical' representation:

Bibliotecaria: Y es que además, a mí me parece muy bonita esa parte de fantasía, no la he encontrado así molesta, representa como otro modo de ver la realidad encarnado en el personaje de Clara y que diríamos que su marido Esteban Trueba es la otra parte de la realidad, que hay tantas maneras de ver las mismas cosas que hay, y de interpretar esa realidad y de vivirla; ... y para mí ha habido cosas que me recuerdan a lo del realismo mágico, que se me viene eso ahora mismo a la cabeza, que a lo mejor estoy diciendo un disparate, que en la literatura Sudamericana que me encanta, de mezclar una realidad tan tangible y por desgracia tan triste como fue la realidad política de Chile en esos momentos y la historia de una familia que tiene una serie de peripecias, que no puede ser más literaria y mezclarla con esa parte espiritual, etérea, que es así la vida misma yo pienso, que tiene parte de realidad y de fantasía (Biblioteca de Guadalajara 1, *La casa de los espíritus*).

Librarian [woman]: And besides, I find this fantasy part very attractive, I don't find it annoying, it represents sort of another way of looking at reality embodied in the character of Clara, and we could say that Trueba is the other side of reality; there are so many ways of looking at the same things, of interpreting reality, and of living it ... and for me there were things that remind me of magical realism, it came to mind just now, maybe I'm talking nonsense, in South American literature which I love, the mixing of such a tangible and sadly such a tragic reality as was Chile's political reality and the story of a family that experiences a series of events, that cannot be more literary and to mix it with the spiritual part, the ethereal, and that is the way life is, I think is part fantasy and part reality.

This librarian from Guadalajara seems to understand magical realism in a similar way to the Leicester reader. Interestingly, both had used the literary term magical realism to refer to what other readers have referred as the 'magical', the 'fantastic' or the 'airy-fairy'. What this suggests is that some British readers, in particular the more scholarly Leicester group, possess some knowledge about

what magical realism signifies in literary terms. This knowledge, however, cannot be transferred to the rest of the British groups and readers in the same way that the knowledge the above Spanish librarian possesses cannot automatically be transferred to all readers in her group or other groups. Despite these differences between readers’ literary knowledge in both research contexts, what may have contributed to the more accommodating attitude some Spanish readers had towards the ‘magical’, might be those cultural traditions supporting what is commonly known as the “miraculous”:

Es que el mundo fantástico me parece real dentro de la irrealidad porque yo soy de un pueblo ... entonces yo esas historias, historias fantásticas, de aparecidos, las he escuchado desde pequeña, en la época de los difuntos, los abuelos nos contaban historietas de esas, y yo recuerdo leyendo *La casa*, cuando se aparecían y estaban por allí los aparecidos y tal y yo recuerdo cosas que a mí me han contado, luego me encuentro muy cómoda, muy reflejada en esas historias (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

The thing is, the fantastic world seems to me real within the unreal because I am from a village ... so those stories, fantastic stories of ghosts, I've been hearing them since I was little, around All Saints Day, our grandparents would tell us stories like these, and I remember reading La casa, when dead people appeared and hung around and so on, I remember things I was told, so I feel very comfortable, I feel represented in those kind of stories.

What the above comment suggests is that this reader’s views regarding the ‘magical’ world in Allende may be influenced by traditional systems of beliefs that seem to accept extraordinary events as “natural” and as part of a wider cultural heritage.

However, within the British cultural traditions, it seems that no logical explanation can be given to any extraordinary event that occurs in a physical reality. I found the article by Jeanne Delbaere Garant (1995) *Psychic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English*, somehow revealing to understand British readers’ relationship to

magical realism. Delbaere looks at three different novelists' use of magical realism in the English language. These novels are *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* by the British novelist Angela Carter, *The Invention of the World* by the Canadian Jack Hodgins and *The Carpathians* by the New Zealand poet and novelist Janet Frame. What interests me from Delbaere's analysis are her remarks extracted from John Fowles' unpublished correspondence with her. Fowles' letter to Delbaere explains that the success of magical realism in the European Continent more than in Britain has to do with Britain's puritanical and moral traditions (*ibid*, 252) in that 'what the British will not accept is that the magic realists can have their cake and eat it – both "blend" reality and be really serious' (*ibid*). Or in the words of this Lincoln reader: 'I thought she was a brilliant storyteller for me, I think she wrote the story to tell us the history of her country in a kind of *fun* (my emphasis) way' (Lincoln Library, *The House of the Spirits*). In this sense, not only does magical realism signify a breach within most British readers' genre expectations but also assumes certain unreliability on behalf of the author's abilities to represent the world in an accurate, truthful and also serious manner. It could therefore be suggested that British and Spanish readers' differing approaches to the magical realism may be also conditioned by deeper interpretations of what constitutes reality.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the role assigned to the historical in Allende, according to British and Spanish readers' responses. For these readers the main historical function was to appraise Allende's narratives as "truth". To support

this claim about Allende's accounts, readers across both research contexts called upon 'extra-literary' accounts whose aim was to confirm Allende's faithful representation of "real" historical facts. Also the use of temporal and space markers in Allende's narratives were mentioned as a means of ensuring and granting truthfulness in *Daughter of Fortune* and *Paula*. On the other hand, the lack of these markers in *The House of the Spirits* prevented some British readers from accurately situating the narrative chronologically and spatially perhaps due to their initial limited knowledge of Allende's personal but public discourses, which as discussed in the third and sixth chapters, tend to inform her fiction. Nonetheless, and despite the absence of temporal markers, British readers were able to relate to and get involved in Allende's story by comparatively situating it within familiar parameters such as the horrors experienced during the Second World War.

This chapter has equally highlighted the importance of the historical as an 'ideology of instruction and self-improvement' (Long 1987). In this sense, for some readers – in particular Spanish - the historical functioned as a means of justifying the act of reading as well as providing entertainment. This entertainment was the result of readers' pleasurable experiences while reading since not only could they identify with the characters – as already discussed in previous chapters – but also the settings evoked in Allende's work.

Finally, this chapter explored readers' relationship with the 'magical' in Allende's *The House of the Spirits*. In particular, British readers found the 'magical' difficult to situate within a narrative whose focus was the recounting of historical events and therefore considered "real". For some British readers the 'magical' interrupted the development of historical processes. Since the

'magical' was unable to foreground the political and was mostly connected to domestic triviality, Clara's passivity and preordination of events, all of these might have exacerbated the general negative response particularly felt among British readers. In addition, some British and Spanish readers' problematic relationship with the 'magical' resided in their difficulty in reconciling certain generic expectations imbued in a narrative whose main aim was to become an eyewitness to history. Whereas some Spanish readers seemed more willing to accept that the 'magical' could coexist with the "real" or historical as part of the same reality, this reading of the 'magical' was not shared by most British readers who found these two opposed poles of the so-called same reality irreconcilable. As suggested in the chapter, British readings of the 'magical' could also have been prompted by the influence caused by cultural traditions which in the British context - as opposed to the Spanish - do not allow the 'magical' to be situated within the same realm of physical reality.

Chapter Eight

British and Spanish Readers' Location of Allende within "Literary" Traditions

Introduction

This chapter explores British readers' location of Allende within the Latin American and British "literary" traditions. It also examines the different ways in which British as well as Spanish readers regard the works of Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez as the primary framework within which Allende's works can be situated.

Finally, this chapter focuses on the analysis of the associations British readers established between Allende's work and that of other British authors such as Angela Carter, Charles Dickens and Louis de Bernières in an attempt to locate her within traditions closer to "home".

The overall analysis of this chapter ultimately seeks to explore how British and Spanish readers' location of Allende within the Latin American and British "literary" traditions can shed some light on the question of Allende's popularity.

British Readers’ Attempts to Locate Allende within the Latin American “Literary” Tradition

a) Allende and García Márquez: Readers’ Comparative Readings in Relation to Structure and Style

Several British readers’ comments aimed at situating Allende within the Latin American “literary” tradition where the works of García Márquez were taken as its utmost representative. Leicester reader B referred to Allende’s work as in ‘debt’ to and as a ‘legacy’ from García Márquez, specifically in terms of structure and style:

B: I meant to ask you, what’s the debt to García Márquez or perhaps the legacy because I did feel the work quite similar to Márquez in structure, and the style of the writing.

C: I don’t know (in response to the comment above)

B: That was one of the areas where I thought there were strong parallels with Márquez, the complex family history where some will die young and complications and ramifications, living with the past ...

(Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*)

Reader B’s particular choice of the words ‘debt’ and ‘legacy’ seems to be implying that Allende’s work is connected to Márquez’s. Although he hesitantly thinks that this connection is based on their common structure and style, no other fellow members in the group seem to be able to clarify or confirm his viewpoint. This connection, though, bears implications at a more practical level. What this British reader may perceive when he reads Márquez is that his writing is more complex stylistically than Allende’s and where form appears to be as important as meaning. Yet, he may also realise that Allende does not quite belong here.

Although she follows on from Márquez, using common generic forms like the family saga, as well as sharing thematic parallels, this reader may equally perceive that Allende makes use of similar themes and structure in a rather accessible way. This, however, is what distances her from Márquez, making this reader’s attempts to literarily locate Allende difficult. Since accessibility has negative connotations, as it is usually associated with “easy” literature, the opposite is believed of texts that are highly experimental with language, themes and structure and therefore more “difficult” like Márquez. For this reason, British readers like this Leicester reader, may be caught between the “literary” status Allende attains through her association with Márquez, and the “popular” position she holds for being experienced as an accessible author, in the sense of “easy” or “low”.

Another stylistic feature some British readers highlighted in comparative terms was the use both authors made of magical realism:

A: I think the magic realism in Márquez I can take, I don’t think she’s actually so good at it; I think she’s better as a realistic writer, personally the strongest parts in the book (Nottingham Library, *The House of the Spirits*).

E: [...] I loved the story [Eva Luna] but kind of know that there were lots of things that were predictable, unlike *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, where you are in another planet altogether, with no relation to anything from the outside world coming in, it was part of the madness ... (Nottingham Reading Group 2, *Eva Luna*).

The contribution made by the above Nottingham Library reader is quite revealing in terms of how, as already discussed in chapter seven, genre expectations can determine readers’ perceptions on the suitability of magical realism. According to this reader, Márquez’s magical realism is “better” than Allende’s based on his consistency in applying it. Similarly, reader E in Nottingham Reading Group 2

finds that, although Márquez’s world appears to be totally removed from the “real” – and perhaps not so attractive since the mimetic pact is not fulfilled - this unfamiliar world consistently prevails through the whole novel, allowing readers to situate themselves within the narrative.

What the above British readers seem to appreciate about Márquez’s work is that they are not presented with a dual world, whereas in Allende’s case, moving from the ‘magical’ to the “real” ends up being detrimental to readers’ acceptance of her skills as a magical realist. This is why in the readers’ own words: ‘she’s better as a realistic writer’. In this respect, it appears that some British readers have successfully situated Allende’s magical realism within the tradition established by Márquez. Again, being associated to magical realism elevates Allende’s status to the “literary” but at the same time her excellence as a magical realist author is difficult to sustain for some British readers in the face of Márquez’s better use of the technique.

b) Allende and García Márquez: Readers’ Establishing Thematic Parallels

On the whole, attempts to relate Allende and Márquez structurally and stylistically with concrete examples appear to be scarce among British readers but this would be considered the “norm” within the very nature of reading groups since according to Long ‘[...] groups rarely discuss the aesthetic dimension of the writing [...]’ (Long 1986:605) and therefore the sort of comment about structure or style made by Leicester reader B was rather unusual and not further explored by other readers in the groups. Instead, British readers seemed more inclined to note relations that connected both works thematically:

C: I thought she was wonderful and I found *The House of the Spirits*, the first one absolutely fantastic; Is it a South American thing, you know, you made a reference to levitation and that occurred in García Márquez and also I’ve been reading a book by Mario Vargas Llosa and there were references to mysticism and levitation, I wonder if that’s South American (Nottingham Reading Group 2, *Eva Luna*).

Nottingham reader’s reference to ‘levitation’ has also been identified as a common theme by some of Allende’s critics when comparing *One Hundred years of Solitude* and *The House of the Spirits*:

Nonetheless, the marks of García Márquez remain evident: prolepses, *levitations* (my emphasis), fairies that appear in the surreal clarity of dusk, notebooks that encapsulate life, the military that tries to annihilate history [...] (Diamond Nigh, 1995:38).

Also the critic Robert Antoni among others⁷⁴ highlights the close relationship that exists between Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* by claiming that:

[...] there is little in Allende’s first pages which does not have its correlation in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and García Márquez may be felt as a palpable presence well into the novel (Antoni, 1988:20).

Robert Antoni further argues that *The House of the Spirits* reads like a parody⁷⁵ of Márquez. In *The House of the Spirit* Allende ‘discovers her own language, which she *substitutes* (his emphasis) for García Márquez’s’ (1988:16). It is within this process of discovering her own language that Antoni draws attention

⁷⁴ Other critics refer to Márquez’s legacy of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* in Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* in terms of ‘borrowings’ or ‘allusions’ (Diamond-Nigh, 1995); ‘congruencias de estructura narrativa y de estilo’ (‘similarities with the narrative structure and style’) (Keck, 1996); ‘modelo retórico común’ or ‘influencia’ (‘common rhetorical model’ or ‘influence’) (Urbina, 1990).

⁷⁵ Linda Hutcheon (1985) in her work *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* uses the term parody not only to refer to a ‘ridiculing imitation’ but as a means to explain ‘modern forms of self-reflexivity’ in which parody is ‘a form of imitation characterized by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text’ (1985:6). Furthermore, Hutcheon refuses to accept parody as a synonym of intertextuality since theories of intertextuality being structurally focussed forget about the importance of the implied reader who perceives and interprets the text. Parody is not just ‘a matter of the text’s somehow parthenogenetic or magical absorption of other texts. Texts do not generate anything until they are perceived and interpreted’ (*ibid*, 23).

to the similarities *The House of the Spirits* exhibits when compared to *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. The most obvious similarities include for example the characterization of Tío Marcos who resembles Melquíades in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*; or how Rosa the Beauty originates in Remedios the Beauty and how to a lesser extent Clara is inspired by Úrsula, Esteban by José Arcadio and Blanca by Amaranta (Antoni, 1988:19-20). Thus, given the plethora of authoritative texts - as well those other ‘extra-literary’ sources that, as seen in chapter three, highlight the parallels between Márquez and Allende - it is not surprising that most British readers find themselves situating Allende’s work within the tradition inaugurated by Márquez and *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.

In popularity terms, the various associations some British readers established between Allende and Márquez is what may have boosted Allende’s popularity, in the sense of associating her with “literary” or “highbrow” authors. However, these associations were not sufficient to solve some of the uncertainties some British readers held in relation to Allende’s “literary” status. It is for this reason that some British readers sought to further locate Allende within a more familiar “literary” tradition, the British, as shall be seen later on in the chapter.

Spanish Readers’ Location of Allende within the Latin American “Literary” Tradition

In the Spanish context, although some of the readers’ comments also connected Allende and Márquez, these connections were the result of my prompting and not because Spanish readers needed to situate Allende somewhere within the Latin

American “literary” tradition. In fact, Spanish readers were confident and knew where Allende belonged within this tradition:

Yo creo que abusa mucho del realismo mágico y trata de imitar demasiado a García Márquez; en algunos puntos y en algunos personajes y en algunas situaciones consigue hacer una genialidad pero no siempre lo consigue, entonces yo le veo que es una de las cosas que le critico, que lo utiliza demasiado y no siempre consigue el que esté bien y es que no me disgusta que haya cosas fantásticas, simplemente no consigue que quede bien (Campanillas, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I think she [Allende] abuses magical realism a lot and tries too hard to imitate García Márquez; in some instances and in some characters and in some cases she [Allende] manages something incredibly good but not always, then I see that this is something I criticise her for, she uses it [magical realism] too much and doesn't always manage to do it well, it is not that I don't like fantastic things, it is just that she [Allende] does not always manage to do it well.

For the above Campanillas reader, Allende belongs within the same tradition as Márquez although Márquez’s magical realism is the “authentic” and Allende’s is just understood as “deficient imitation”. However, this is not all there is to it. Some Spanish readers also made explicit references to when Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* was first published and how at the time it was criticised because of its similarities to Márquez. Even one of the Fontanar man readers confessed that he had approached Allende’s text expecting to find some ‘plagiarism’. This reader further explains that despite Allende’s similarities to Márquez, he noticed that she possessed her own style:

Y además una cosa curiosa cuando este libro salió [*La casa de los espíritus*] mucha gente le criticó la similitud con García Márquez, con *Cien años de soledad* y de hecho cuando salió y la primera vez que lo leí pues casi lo leía buscando un poco de plagio y bueno ahora ha demostrado que es una escritora que vale y ha creado un estilo propio que bueno va en una línea parecida (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

And something curious is that when this book [The House of the Spirits] came out, a lot of people criticised her [Allende] because of its similarities with García Márquez, with One Hundred Years of Solitude; and in fact when it came out and the first time I read it, I was almost reading it looking for a bit of plagiarism and well now she[Allende] has demonstrated that she’s a good writer and has created her own personal style, which goes along similar lines [to Márquez].

Although this reader’s comment does not offer an insight into what constitutes Allende’s own style, perhaps he could be referring to what Patricia Hart coined as ‘magical feminism’. Hart defines it as ‘magical realism used in a femino-centric novel or [magical realism] to make an authentic observation about the behaviour and condition of women in the sociohistoric conditions depicted in the novel’ (Hart, 1989: 174). What is interesting in Hart’s study is that she suggests that ‘magical feminism’ does not exclude any men novelists and that for example Márquez’s novel *El amor en los tiempos del cólera* [*Love in the Times of Cholera*] is a ‘good example’ (*ibid*) of its use. Hart’s arguments go even further since one of her powerful claims is that after the publication of *The House of the Spirits*, Márquez’s text won’t ever be read without ‘remembering Clara del Valle’s asides about how repeated names cause confusion in the notebooks that record family life’ (*ibid*). According to Hart, Márquez-Allende’s relationship should be addressed in different terms by seriously considering the possibility that Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* could influence the readings of Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and not the other way round.

Perhaps, Spanish readers’ prejudices regarding Allende’s work as “deficient imitation” may have been influenced by “literary” authoritative voices and not by a genuine conviction about Márquez’s excellence as shown by the following conversation:

[*La casa de los espíritus*] la leí hace tiempo y ahora la he releído y me gustó entonces y me ha vuelto a gustar ahora, me parece que pone mucha imaginación y que es una historia, una aventura como muy completa y me recuerda a *Cien años de soledad* de García Márquez y me pareció que se parecía en algo siendo menor porque claro la de García Márquez me parece muchísimo mejor que ésta, pero vamos que había como un hilo, como una historia de una saga familiar.

I read it [The House of the Spirits] a long time ago and now I have re-read it, and I liked it then and I like it now too; I think she puts a lot of imagination into it and that it's a story, an adventure which is very accomplished and reminds me of One Hundred Years of Solitude by García Márquez, and I thought that it [The House of the Spirits] was somehow similar but at a lower level because of course I think García Márquez's a lot better than this, but there was like a thread, a family saga story [running between the two]...

María: ¿Por qué te pareció la de García Márquez mejor?

María: Why did García Márquez's novel seem better to you?

No sé, me pareció más divertida, más entretenida, más disparatada y es que esas cosas tan disparatadas y a veces tan reales, me parece... no sé me gusta, me llega personalmente, yo es que con la de García Márquez me reía, yo estaba leyendo el libro y me reía y ésta [*La casa de los espíritus*] me ha recordado algunos pasajes.

I don't know, it [One Hundred Years of Solitude] seemed to me funnier, more entertaining, more ludicrous, and sometimes those absurd things, sometimes so real, it seems to me ... I don't know, I like it, it touches me personally, with García Márquez I used to laugh, I'd read the book and I'd laugh and with this one [The House of the Spirits] has reminded me of some passages.

(Biblioteca de Guadalajara 2, *La casa de los espíritus*)

The above Spanish reader first defended her “literary” judgement on the basis of Márquez’s being more ‘entertaining’ to finally say that ‘she liked it’ as she appeared to have connected more with Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. However, despite this reader’s efforts to convince me that Márquez’s novel was better than Allende’s, what I believe may have been influencing this reader’s views was the educational and instruction-led approach characteristic of

most Spanish groups. It would be expected and appropriate from the librarian-moderators to “teach” readers to appreciate what are considered “high literary” forms as opposed to “low” as a means to fulfil the groups’ educational objectives so readers also know how to cultivate “good” as well as “literary” taste. This does not mean that Spanish librarians have positioned Allende as “low” but, perhaps, not as “good” as Márquez.

In addition, and as noted in chapter three, Spanish academic discourses may have also encouraged this kind of readers’ responses since Allende’s work is being framed by Spanish academia just in terms of a ‘publishing phenomenon’ as well as excluded from the canon. On the other hand, since Spanish readers are likely to be more experienced readers of other Latin American authors who employ similar “literary” techniques to Allende, they also may feel more confident to be critical of Allende’s literariness.

Nonetheless, it seems that overall Spanish readers – like most of their British counterparts - may be caught between the discourses that place Márquez as a “better” author - in “literary” terms - and their more pleasurable reading experiences of Allende. Moreover, what confirms this, is that although Spanish readers – as well as librarians – regard Márquez as “literarily” superior to Allende, his works do not appear as reading choices in some of the Spanish reading groups’ lists. Allende is by far a more “popular” reading choice than Márquez if we consider that all Spanish groups have read several of her titles. What this means is that holding a “literary” reputation like Márquez is not the only means to guarantee any authors’ popularity among their readers.

British Readers’ Attempts to Locate Allende within the British “Literary” Tradition

Only British readers established comparisons between Allende’s work and that of other non-Latin American authors. British readers compared *The House of the Spirits* primarily to the novels of Angela Carter, and in particular, they mentioned *The Magic Toyshop* (1967) and *Nights at the Circus* (1984), the works of Charles Dickens, with no specific mention of any of his titles and finally the more contemporary *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* by Louis de Bernières was also associated with Allende’s works. What these associations suggest, is that British readers are less familiar with Latin American “literary” traditions. It is for this reason that they need to situate Allende within more familiar parameters from which they could confidently assess her “literary” status.

a) Angela Carter

To begin with, it is interesting to note that critics like Olga Kenyon (1991) have written the following about Carter:

The Magic Toyshop appeared in 1967, the year Gabriel García Márquez’s novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* was published. Carter considers that the success of Márquez prepared the public to accept her writing. Both Márquez and Carter have been called ‘magic realists’. [...] Though not as sweeping in imaginative scope as Márquez’s novels, *The Magic Toyshop* moves skilfully between fantasy and reality [...] (1991:18).

Keynon’s words reveal the connection some critics have established between Carter and Márquez. Similarly Helen Carr (1989) claimed that ‘Angela Carter’s novels became much more acceptable in Britain after the discovery of South

American magic realism: her readers discovered that she was writing in a genre that could be named and to whose apparent random mixture of fantasy and reality some order could be assigned’ (1989:7). Nonetheless, this connection is also regarded as problematic. Linden Peach (1998) initially suggests in her monograph about Angela Carter that it ‘creates more problems of definition that it solves’ (1998:7) since according to Carter herself, ‘the kind of social forces that produced Gabriel García Márquez [...] were very different from those that produced her’ (Haffenden in Peach, 1998:7). Despite Peach’s initial reservations in describing Carter’s 1970s fiction as magical realist, later on, she appears to accept the label when using Isabel Allende’s definition of magical realism. For Peach, Allende’s definition stresses the idea that realism is ‘locked in a continuous dialectic with that of fantasy’ (1998:8) and in this respect in Carter’s work ‘generally the conflation of the fantastic and the factual inscribes a tension between the representational code of “realism” and fantasy’ (*ibid*, 9).

Given the connections several critics established between Márquez, Allende and Carter, it is not surprising that parallels between these two women authors also emerged among some British readers. Whether or not these British readers may have been influenced by “literary” reviews which may have suggested Carter’s magical realist undertones, it is likely that the connections they established had partly been based on their own reading experiences too. In addition, and by dying of cancer in 1992, Carter’s works suddenly appeared to have received more critical attention than they ever did, notwithstanding the fact that her novels began to sell in great numbers when she became widely read in English university campuses (Peach, 1998):

She dies untimely, and everyone suddenly burst out weeping. The obituaries give her better notices than anything she ever received

in her lifetime. Her books sell out within three days of her death. She becomes the most read contemporary author on English university campuses. Her last story, finished during her final illness, sells 80,000 copies in paperback. She has arrived. But she is dead. (Barker in Peach, 1998:1).

What these words suggest is that Carter’s death brought her recognition. As unfortunate as this may be, this could have been one of many reasons that could explain why these British readers may have encountered her work since it seems that Carter’s had not been - and still isn’t, judging by the overall Lincoln readers’ response – a “popular” choice, in the sense of being a repeated reading choice like Allende among Spanish groups. So far, what both authors seem to have in common - and what may explain their popularity - is their use of “literary” techniques such as magical realism as well as having attracted the media’s attention, although for very different reasons, as in the case of Carter’s unexpected death.

The following conversation among some of the Nottingham Reading Group 2 readers could shed some light in understanding the nature of the Carter-Allende connection:

F: This author [Allende] reminds me of Angela’s storytelling and it’s similar from a child’s point of view, you know, and how life is, our Angela is more biographical isn’t she?

B: I’ve only read one Angela Carter and that was the first book we ever read

____: I thought this [Eva Luna] was like it

____ : Yes

B: Angela Carter was the only English equivalent to this

E: *Nights at the Circus* has some of that, at the beginning finding the angel’s wings

A: And everything coming together at the end. I just thought the business of her [Eva] finding everybody at the end, it's impossible, she finds her grandmother again, she finds her godmother, you know her godmother tries to kill herself but she fails, you know; she [Eva] manages to make her happy, she manages to make Mimi happy, everything, and that reminds me of Angela Carter, everything very convenient but very convincing in the sense it was very very very nicely crafted

B: I just thought the Angela Carter was just silly, whereas it was so political [Eva Luna] and the journalistic field brings in some sort of reality for me and makes the magical side of it absolutely acceptable, you know what I mean, bringing into realism and into the present day.

(Nottingham Reading Group 2, *Eva Luna*)

For the Nottingham readers, Carter is the ‘only English equivalent’ to Allende’s *Eva Luna* on the grounds of Carter’s heroine’s angel’s wings. Carter’s image of the woman angel is what appears to be considered magical realist among this group of readers. Besides, Carter’s resemblance to Allende does not only reside in the unconventional physical attributes of their characters, but also in their shared ‘storytelling’ techniques.

Nottingham reader F’s comments are slightly ambiguous since it is difficult to interpret what she means by ‘similar from a child’s point of view’ and Carter being ‘more biographical’ than Allende. Perhaps, the reference to a ‘child’s point of view’ could be understood in terms of how a child’s imagination would easily accept accounts which adult readers would consider completely unrealistic or farfetched like possessing wings. Carter being more ‘biographical’ than Allende is, perhaps, making a specific reference to some of Carter’s recurring themes. Such themes include for example the absence of the mother figure which in *Shadow Dance* (1966), *The Magic Toyshop* (1967), *Heroes and Villains* (1969) and *Love* (1971) appears to have certain resonance with her own

experience as a post-war child raised by her grandmother (Peach, 1998: 16). On the other hand, Nottingham reader A compared both authors on the basis of their ‘convenient’ but also ‘convincing’ happy endings which are common to their ‘storytelling’. It appears that this reader may be criticising Carter and Allende’s forms of storytelling for its predictability, but more interesting are the comments from Nottingham reader B who defines Carter’s stories as ‘silly’ for their total detachment from reality. According to this reader, in contrast to Carter, Allende’s stories become acceptable because there is a sense of reality that in turn makes reasonable the ‘magical’ within. On this rare occasion among British readers, the ‘magical’ has not been interpreted as an obstacle to connect to the reality represented in the stories. For Nottingham reader B, the magical appears to form an intrinsic part of the ‘political reality’ that is being described, as if the ‘magical’ elements acted as distortions of a complex and unfamiliar reality but not as part of a different dimension. In this respect, Allende’s ‘storytelling’ could be considered more appealing than Carter’s since in Allende, the sense of the “real” overpowers the ‘magical’ whereas in Carter, readers seem to be confined to a world of fantasy which does not bear any resemblance to the “real” and consequently is unable to ‘affect’ (Ricoeur, 1988) the reader’s own world. Perhaps in Carter’s case it is readers’ inability to establish dialogues with the author’s world that precludes their reading from being a ‘truly vital experience’ (*ibid*) whereas in Allende, readers seem to achieve a dialectic experience despite any initial obstacles created by Allende’s ‘magical’ world.

Some Lincoln readers also drew parallels between Allende’s *The House of the Spirits* and *The Magic Toyshop* once more on the basis of magic elements intermingling with the “real”:

A: I think because like *The Magic Toyshop* has got these elements of magic round real events but at the same time you are never quite sure like in this book [*The House of the Spirits*] how much is in the head and how much is happening outside, you know, I mean, is this girl really a mermaid [Rosa in *The House of the Spirits*] or is it in her [Isabel Allende’s] imagination? And the same with Angela Carter’s *Nights at the Circus* when the girl can fly can she really fly or it’s just the kind of trick that she [Carter] has managed to create? And at the end of the book it doesn’t matter but at the beginning you ask yourself the question and then it just becomes magic, it becomes so natural; you just go with it ... And I think it’s very much the same as *The Magic Toyshop*, you have this house with this peculiar basement with things that may or may not be alive and it’s the same feel about this house, things happening in the basement, you know, the dog’s skin and it’s got the same ... where almost anything could happen

María: How popular is Angela Carter in England, would you choose a book from her to read?

Rest of the group: No, [laughs]

E: Very eccentric things

A: The other thing about Angela Carter, it’s got the same assemblage of eccentric characters.

As with some of the Nottingham readers, Lincoln reader A comments that, although as a reader, one may feel confused and not able to discern what is “real” and what is not, this dichotomy ultimately renders itself irrelevant. Once the reader partakes of the unfamiliar world of ‘magic’ and accepts its peculiar ways of approaching reality, then it follows that there is no further need to distinguish between a ‘magical’ and a “real” world because the reader considers both part of the same reality. This is when according to Lincoln reader A: ‘it becomes so natural; you just go with it’.

Another interesting aspect from the Lincoln comments was the unanimously negative response to my question about considering Carter as a

reading choice. To begin with, members’ laughing reaction to the question⁷⁶ could be interpreted as readers’ unconscious way of expressing their dislike towards her novels, but more specifically, towards her unconventional means of representing the world. This is supported by the remarks that overall define her characters as ‘eccentric’. As noted in chapter three, readers granted enormous importance to characterization and in the context of Allende, the ‘extraordinary’/ ‘eccentric’ nature of some of them produced some ambiguous reactions among some British and Spanish readers. Likewise are the reactions emerging among this group of readers who considered Carter’s characters’ ‘eccentricity’ and therefore lack of realistic attributes as one of the main reasons for their dislike of her work.

As discussed earlier on, one of the key elements of Allende’s success appears to be her accessibility, despite the use of “literary” techniques such as magical realism. What this means is that Allende can be located within the “literary” by sharing common “literary” elements to Carter’s experimental and postmodern narratives. Nonetheless, and for the same reason, Carter may be a less “popular” choice among British readers because her “highbrow” aesthetics, although elevating her to the “literary”, on the other hand make her less accessible and appealing to readers. In other words, readers’ inability or difficulty to connect with Carter’s worlds is what makes her a less “popular” writer than Allende.

⁷⁶ The Lincoln group was the only group in the British context that requested their session to be led by me. This is why I prompted Lincoln readers to say more about Angela Carter.

b) Charles Dickens

Dickens and Allende were connected by some British readers on the basis of their greatness in their respective “literary” traditions

B: I knew it was one of these iconic texts of South American literature you ought to have read, a bit like Dickens (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

The use of the word ‘iconic’ confers a sense of reverence and importance as according to the above reader both seem to be the utmost representatives of their respective “literary” traditions. Further, Dickens is known as a “classic” and ‘by definition worth the effort since the historical sedimentation of authority that gives these books the patina of greatness remains unnoticed and undisputed’ (Long, 1986:599). Although in Allende’s case, her “literary” status is not that of a “classic”, her inclusion within the Latin American “literary” tradition of the *post-boom* and her connection to Márquez helps her attain the prestige Dickens holds as a “classic”. Perhaps, it is this association with the Latin American “literary” tradition what makes readers consider her ‘worth the effort’ but it is difficult to determine if this is the underlying assumption in this group of Leicester readers since, as Long argues:

[...] the process by which they [cultural authorities] create and defend cultural legitimacy remains largely invisible to group members. Its results are encoded in the bedrock of taken-for-granted assumptions about “literary” worth that inform each group’s understandings about what is appropriate to read in general, and are only rarely articulated in the consideration of specific books (1986:599).

On the other hand, what also seems to have brought Dickens and Allende together were their similarities regarding characterization:

D: It reminds me of Dickens, characters written around one peculiarity (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

For Dickens it was important how characters looked, their peculiar expressions and particular gestures because these were symptomatic of the characters’ inner conflicts and psychological motivations. As noted in chapter four, the latter is what British and Spanish readers expected too from Allende since: ‘[...] the development of the thought is inextricably related to the development of a central character. Sometimes, indeed, both the author and the reader first discover the theme by following the character’s growth’ (Eigner, 1978:84). In addition, Allende’s cameos and disappearing characters also reminded Birmingham reader C of Dickens:

C: If we talk about whether we enjoyed the book or not, has anybody seen the serialisation of Dickens life? I don’t mean that Isabel Allende is exactly as Charles Dickens but she’s got a lot of cameos, you know, people dying for instance, this dying very interesting with Isabel Allende’s book; you do remember the characters, some of them are little cameos, ... Isabel Allende’s characters, where Dickens is very visual and that’s where they are not exactly the same but there’s a whole theatre of characters isn’t it? (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

This reader’s comments also imply that although they have a short life in the story, these are meaningful characters that tend to be remembered by the reader.

What all these comments suggest, is that some British readers may have connected Dickens to Allende first on the basis of their literariness, for both being representatives of their respective “literary” traditions, and for that reason alone, ‘worth the effort’. Moreover, not only does Dickens belong to and represent the British “literary” tradition of nineteenth-century realism but also he became like Allende one of the most “popular”, that is, a widely read international author of his time, a “literary” celebrity⁷⁷ despite his current

⁷⁷ According to Jessica Evans (2005) ‘Before the invention of the film star the emerging mass circulation press of the late 1800s began to cover celebrity and to create celebrities as a result’ (2005:24). Evans further argues that this interest also included “literary” celebrity where authors

recognition as “classic”. Like Allende, Dickens’ characterization also played an important role in conferring success on his works. Dickens’ characters were at the centre of the story and seemed to have attracted readers by appealing to their emotions. If this is the case - and as discussed when analysing Allende’s characters - most readers’ identifications and experience of the characters’ worlds in Dickens, must have taken place also at an emotional level. In this sense, the characters’ melodramatic appeal appears to constitute an important factor characterising Dickens as well as Allende’s popularity. Nonetheless, what these British readers’ associations between Dickens and Allende reveal is that by comparing her to an author like Dickens, some British readers may have been once more trying to situate Allende in the “literary” realm. In Dickens, British readers may have found an author who held an intermediate position since although being a “classic” his works were accessible and readers could identify with the worlds and characters described in them. If Dickens could successfully be considered a “literary” author and have such a “popular” appeal, perhaps Allende could hold a similar position without losing her “literary” prestige.

c) Louis de Bernières

Two readers belonging to two different groups (Nottingham Reading Group 2 and Birmingham Reading Group 2) made a connection between *Eva Luna*, *The House of the Spirits* and *Captain’s Corelli’s Mandolin*. The most apparent reason to establish the Bernières-Allende connection could be explained in terms

would offer interviews in the intimacy of their homes creating for readers a sense of ‘a privileged glimpse of their private world’ (*ibid*).

of a mere coincidence. At approximately the time I was conducting my research with the British reading groups, the film adaptation of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* was released in the UK. The *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* movie was released in May 2001⁷⁸ and I met up with Nottingham Reading Group 2 approximately ten months after its release and with Birmingham Reading Group 2 around thirteen months after. This means that some group members had possibly watched the film as well as read the book. However, having checked the book lists produced by some of the British groups in their group questionnaires, I found surprising that none of them listed *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* as read.

What is also remarkable is that the author, Louis de Bernières, started to receive critical, as well as media attention, after the publication of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* in 1994. This novel also won him the Commonwealth Writers Prize and was translated into eleven languages⁷⁹. Thus, given the circumstances surrounding this novel, it makes sense to think that British readers' interest in Bernières just started to emerge when *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* was published and not before. This is, in turn, particularly significant since his prior three novels, *The War of Don Emmanuel's Nether Parts* (1990), *Señor Vivo and the Coca Lord* (1991) and *The Troublesome Offspring of Cardinal Guzmán* (1992) could have been easily related to Allende for their thematic proximity but had not been considered or mentioned at all by British readers. According to Bernières, these first three novels had been heavily

⁷⁸ Perry, George. *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* (2001) [online]. Available from: http://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2001/04/11/captain_corellis_mandolin_2001_review.shtml. [Accessed 17 April 2007].

⁷⁹ The Random House Group. *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. [online]. Available from: <http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/offthepage/guide.htm?command=Search&db=/catalog>. [Accessed 17 April 2007]

influenced by his own personal experiences in Colombia as an English teacher and by the traditions of Latin American magical realism⁸⁰. In this respect, one would expect that the two readers who made the connections between Bernières and Allende would have had any of his first three novels in mind as a reference point – given their magical realist undertones - rather than *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*, but this was not the case. What this suggests, is that it is still difficult to determine what elements in *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* moved readers to associate these two authors’ works. Nottingham reader E’s comments are not very explicit; it is just a mention of Bernières’ book but no further explanation follows:

E: An uncanny thing happened to me today that I kept thinking of *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*, I couldn’t get it out of my head, and I kept finding parallels (Nottingham Reading Group 2, *Eva Luna*).

Birmingham reader B’s comment is more elaborate and draws a thematic parallel between *The House of the Spirits* and *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*:

B: I think *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* shows how the young man would brutalise going into the army and it very clear seems to me how somebody because of peer pressure can become that brutal, can become brainwashed to join them again, and I think this book [*The House of the Spirits*] explains to me how a family [Trueba-del Valle] in that set up can come to grief when there’s a revolution, I mean, the ways the revolution affects that family, I think I like the book from that point of view because it explains to me in the same way (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

It appears that for this Birmingham reader, violence is the underlying connection between the two. Violence seems to carry disastrous results as in the case of *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin* it corrupts the young fisherman’s human nature by making him love war more than his fiancée. Also, in the context of *The House of*

⁸⁰ The Random House Group. *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*. [online]. Available at: <http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/offthepage/guide.htm?command=Search&db=/catalog>. [Accessed 17 April 2007]

the Spirits it seems that the power and violence exercised by those at the top have very negative repercussions for the Trueba-del Valle family. Some of its members had been actively participating in the same abuse that brings the family to grief when they realise what an autocratic revolution can do to the country and its people.

Nonetheless, and regardless of this thematic parallel drawn between these two novels, what actually might have brought readers to connect these two authors and books, might have been the exoticism emanating from the authors’ images as well as stories. It appears that Bernières made it in the highly competitive world of literature because he fitted the profile few young English writers meet since:

For a long time now, critics have been calling for authors who are less ‘English’, more cosmopolitan. Well, here’s one with a French name, a travelled past, writing epic novels not one of which is set anywhere near England, sitting in a cramped flat above a junk shop, deserving to be noticed.⁸¹

These comments are rather revealing. It seems that Bernières’ appeal does not only originate in his “literary” skills but also in his departure from the contemporary English writing tradition. Although home born and reared, Bernières holds an exotic touch like Allende. At first glance, his surname is foreign and his work is set in strange and exotic South American locations or closer to England, in the Greek island of Cephallonia. Not only this, although it is difficult to determine if the film release had boosted the popularity already achieved by the novel or if it happened the other way round, more than likely the film settings reinforced the idea of the exotic already surrounding the book and its author. Having watched the film it is difficult to forget the inviting scenery of

⁸¹ The Random House Group. *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*. [online]. Available from: <http://www.randomhouse.co.uk/offthepage/guide.htm?command=Search&db=/catalog>. [Accessed 17 April 2007]

blue waters and captivating women such as Penélope Cruz whose “foreignness” complements this exotic dimension as well as the attractive image that the settings try to recreate. Thus, it seems that the film adaptation could have had a considerable influence on these readers’ views about the book, an influence which Bernières himself angrily expressed during an interview in the Spanish newspaper *El País*:

La película influyó mucho, lo cual me parece un insulto. No comprendo por qué la gente piensa que un filme es más interesante que un libro. Los libros son infinitamente mejores, superiores. Aportan placer, permiten tomar rutas falsas, desarrollar personajes, [...] y una película no es más que una abreviación. El lector crea imágenes propias en su cabeza mientras que en las películas el intelecto queda al margen del proceso. No quiero escribir guiones ni ser famoso por ser el autor de la novela de una película (*El País*, 17 Noviembre 2001).

The film had a major impact, which I thought was insulting. I don't understand why people think that a film is more interesting than a book. Books are infinitely better, superior. Books give you pleasure, allow you to take different paths, some false, develop characters, [...] and a film is no more than an abbreviation. The reader creates his own images in his head while in films the intellect is marginalised from the process. I don't want to write screenplays or be famous for being the author of a novel turned into a movie.

Overall, it seems that with *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* Bernières stopped just being ‘noticed’ to become one of the most acclaimed and successful young contemporary English writers. In this respect, Bernières may be regarded by British readers as the ideal ambassador to represent the new and sophisticated image of English literature, which in order to transcend national boundaries, has undergone a revitalizing make over to sell at home as well as abroad. Equally, Allende could be perceived in similar terms, as the perfect ambassador of Latin American literature outside its borders. In this sense, both authors’ exotic appeal

is what may have moved British readers to bring them together rather than any shared “literary” aspects of their writings.

Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how within the Latin American “literary” tradition, the works of Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez - and specifically *One Hundred Years of Solitude* - have served as the comparative framework for British and Spanish readers within which to situate Allende in “literary” terms.

The Allende-Márquez connection was mainly established in thematic terms and in their respective use of magical realism. Whereas British readers criticised Allende’s magical realism for its inconsistent use in *The House of the Spirits*, Spanish readers’ criticisms seem to have originated in authoritative assumptions that situate Márquez as an author with finer “literary” skills compared to Allende’s unsuccessful attempts to emulate his style. On the one hand, both the use of magical realism and her association with Márquez seem to have boosted Allende’s popularity as for British and Spanish readers it granted her “literary” status, that is, she is “popular” because she is “literary”. However, since Allende’s version of magical realism was considered by Spanish readers as “deficient imitation” or as the cause for breaching British readers’ generic expectations, this, in turn, made her less “popular”, that is, less “literary” although more accessible than Márquez. What this means is that for some readers, Allende’s popularity and appeal rests on being perceived and experienced as an “easy” read as opposed to “difficult”.

This chapter has also discussed how British readers opted to assert their confidence in relation to the “literary” value of an unfamiliar reading choice like Allende, by drawing comparisons within more familiar but equally different parameters. This was achieved by readers comparing Allende to authors belonging to the British “literary” tradition rather than only relying on authors belonging to the relatively unknown Latin American “literary” tradition.

British readers’ connections between Allende and British novelist Angela Carter seemed underpinned by the latter recreating fantasy worlds populated by unconventional characters. Moreover, and similarly to what was concluded with Márquez, it was Carter’s magical realist undertones, as well as her position as a “highbrow” author, that may have contributed to boost Allende’s “literary” status.

The relationship British readers established between Dickens and Allende appeared to have focussed on the common aspects of their characterization and their “literary” position as representatives of specific British and Latin American traditions respectively. What seems to have moved British readers to compare Dickens to Allende is that in Dickens, British readers found an author whose position as a “classic”, did not preclude his accessibility and readers’ involvement in his worlds. In this sense, perhaps for British readers, Allende held a similar position, being accessible as well as holding “literary” status.

Finally, some British readers made connections between Allende’s *Eva Luna* and *The House of the Spirits* and Bernières’ *Captain Corelli’s Mandolin*. Given the tentative thematic commonalities British readers drew between Bernières and Allende’s works, it appears that what brought these two authors together was their exotic touch rather than any “literary” features.

What these three comparisons equally revealed was that British readers’ concerns to situate Allende might have also been connected to their own self-identities as readers. Most British readers appeared to want to be perceived as intellectual or as “high/middle brow” readers. For this reason, when being faced with an unknown reading choice like Allende, they found themselves in the necessity to find out about Allende’s “literary” value in order to guarantee not only her worth but also maintain their own self-identity as “literary” or “highbrow” readers.

Chapter Nine

British and Spanish Readers' Responses to Allende's 'Crafted' Novels

Introduction

This chapter analyses a series of textual elements readers identified as characteristic of Allende's novels. To facilitate this analysis, I have grouped these different elements under the broader categories of 'crafted' or 'accessible'. Under the 'crafted' category, I particularly discuss features such as the use of first and third person narrative, the use of prolepsis, the visual image of what is represented and the use of humour. Under the category 'accessible', I consider what readers meant by defining Allende in terms of an 'easy read', as well as a formulaic and melodramatic author. Most of the readers' comments correspond to those made at the end of each session and therefore are intended as a summary to highlight what readers mostly enjoyed in Allende's novels.

This chapter also explores British readers' responses to the consumption of translated versions of Allende's originals in Spanish. The concerns expressed by some of the British readers around translation are intimately linked to the hegemonic position of the English language in the world, a position that contributes to the current marginalisation of translation in British culture. This analysis equally aims at assessing the impact that the consumption of translated

versions have in shaping Allende's popularity within the specific context of British readers.

Allende's Novels As 'Crafted' Texts

Elizabeth Long claims that some reading groups strive to 'analyse books as crafted texts to understand their inner workings and to justify evaluation [...]' (Long, 1987:317). In Long's experience though, this kind of analysis corresponds to critics rather than reading groups since reading groups focus particularly on 'appreciation' as a means for readers to feel inspired by the beauty of the words or to 'look through them [the words] to the reality they transmit' (*ibid*). This may well be the case in most reading groups but it does not necessarily mean that readers never or rarely attempt to analyse books as 'crafted' texts.

Among British groups, the common phrase 'beautifully-crafted' appeared to have meant something different for each of the readers who used it. 'Rich characters' and 'wonderful descriptions' were key elements for describing the 'crafted' nature of *The House of the Spirits*:

A: Beautifully crafted, characters are rich, colourful, with conflicts inside themselves, in the case of Clara, wonderful descriptions (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

As discussed in chapter four, the word 'rich' encompassed the notion of psychological motivated characters, close to the "real" people readers had experience of and with whom readers got involved at an emotional level. Equally important for readers, was to be able to 'picture place and settings' (Long, 1986:605). Allende seems to have achieved this through her 'wonderful

descriptions'. Moreover, these elements seemed to have been connected by an underlying assumption that governs the 'classic realist' text, that is, by how successfully Allende's text fitted the reality criteria outside it, in a mimetic sense. The above Leicester reader's comments are therefore reminding us once more that these features are key components to the success and appeal of Allende's novels.

'Crafted' also meant how Allende's novels successfully fulfilled readers' expectations about narrative closure:

A: [...] I loved the way everything came together at the end as you said, it's beautifully crafted and you had these two parallel stories, you had Eva as a child and then you had Rolf as a boy; you knew they were coming together and that was fine, it wasn't contrived, it was natural (Nottingham Reading Group 2, *Eva Luna*).

In this case, Allende's parallel stories in *Eva Luna* came to an expected "happy ending" which the above Nottingham reader considered crucial for her enjoyment of the novel. Moreover, Allende was able to fulfil this reader's generic expectations by delivering a satisfactory ending to the two main stories.

Finally, 'crafted' takes on a different meaning altogether since some readers used it to refer to the editing process undertaken by the author:

B: I would like to know when she writes if she keeps going back to edit every word, if it's 'crafted' (Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*).

It appears that this reader was interested in Allende's crafting as an objective practice where the author makes conscious choices of language and structure.

Overall, and although the phrase 'beautifully crafted' or simply 'crafted' seems to take on different meanings, there is still a fundamental theme connecting all of these different uses. By choosing to define Allende's texts as 'crafted', readers are inadvertently implying that Allende is concerned with the

form as much as with the production of meaning in her novels. This, in turn, becomes a feature that explains her popularity among British readers. Allende is “popular” in the sense that readers associate her writings with “high” literature forms as opposed to “low”. As shall be seen in more detail later on in the chapter, this ‘crafted’ nature of Allende’s writings is concretised by the specific examples readers brought to the discussion. Among these examples, readers highlighted the following: the changes from third narrative person to first narrative person, the use of prolepsis, the visual image of what is represented and the use of humour.

a) From Third Person Narrative to First Person

In *The House of the Spirits*, readers find out at the end of the novel that Allende has been narrating through Alba and Esteban, and in *Eva Luna*, through the main character Eva. However, for some of these readers, Allende’s use of the third person narrative is not as straightforward as it may appear:

E: I forgot but the book I read the other day had the same type of narration, a narrative structure where you have a first person telling you the story and then a sort of narrator telling you the rest and I’m always in trouble with that The thing about the first person and the third person, that actually she’s [Eva] the storyteller but she’s telling stories about things she couldn’t possibly know, sometimes that’s down to some arrogance but it’s not here because they are absolutely believable; the bit about Rolf’s father, that’s awful (Nottingham Reading Group 2, *Eva Luna*).

The above reader noticed that Eva was narrating events that Rolf had told her about, but at the same time, Rolf could not have known about or remembered them because the narrator (Eva) has previously told us, as readers, that Rolf was too young to remember the terrible things that happened to his father. Still, how

does Eva know about them? In this case Eva is 'partaking of the omniscience of the traditional third person author' (Perricone, 1994:56) and this appears to be particularly problematic for readers. Similarly, in the following conversation the Fontanar readers⁸² appeared to have had some trouble when trying to decipher how Clara could have been narrating if she was already dead:

α : A mí lo que me ha llamado bastante la atención es que tan pronto te lo está contando Esteban como no; algunas hojas las he leído varias veces para ver si encontraba quien lo contaba en ese momento

α : What caught my attention is that sometimes Esteban is telling you the story and sometimes he is not; I have read some pages a few times to see if I could find who was telling the story at that moment

β : Al final del libro yo he sacado en conclusión que bueno quien realmente lo está escribiendo es la nieta, entonces también cuenta que el abuelo está con ella contando y escribiendo mientras ella está escribiendo

β : At the end of the book I reached the conclusion that well, the granddaughter is really the one telling the story; then she says that the grandfather is with her telling and writing while she's writing

α : Eso es lo que yo también pensé, pero luego volvía a otras hojas donde te hablaban de Esteban y de Alba pero otra persona

α : That's what I thought too, but then I turned back to other pages where they were talking about Esteban and Alba, but another person

β : Pero es Clara

β : But it's Clara

α : Pero ya cuando ha muerto Clara.

α : But when she's already dead.

⁸² On this occasion I purposely identified each of the Spanish readers taking part in this conversation with the first two letters of the Greek alphabet. This differentiation aims at clarifying for the reader of this thesis the order in which each made a contribution. It does not aim at identifying specific comments as already explained in chapter two as this was not possible with Spanish groups given the large number of members taking part in the discussions.

(Fontanar Reading Group, *La casa de los espíritus*).

Besides, some readers found that on a number of occasions a first person narrator and male would take over Alba's narrative voice in a kind of forceful way:

B: What I thought, it was interesting, this male voice, Esteban who occasionally intrudes, he does intrude, you kind of feel, who's this person? What are they doing in this story? And yet he's part of the story and he occasionally forces his voice in and he's forced out again, to get back to the women's perspective (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

It seems that this Leicester reader defined Trueba's narrative voice in similar terms to his violent behaviour, as if by 'intruding' and 'forcing his voice in', Allende had managed to transfer Trueba's violence to the level of narrative voice. Moreover, it seemed that some readers enjoyed this shift of narrative perspective mostly for adding 'objectivity' to what was being narrated:

B: I thought it was quite interesting how she used different voices and in quite short period of time, in a chapter, you have something in the voice of Trueba, then someone describing a scene, almost what appears to be an objective picture of what is happening (Nottingham Library, *The House of the Spirits*).

This objectivity is also what Catherine Perricone underlines when examining the use of the first person narrative in Allende's *El Plan Infinito* (1991) (*The Infinite Plan*) since it 'produces more dramatic effects [...] as well as increasing the verisimilitude of the narrative' (Perricone, 1994:57). Nonetheless, what is common to most British and Spanish readers is the way in which they have phrased the use of this literary technique as 'something interesting' or 'lo que me ha llamado la atención' ('what caught my attention'). In this sense, and as already noted earlier on, it appears that readers, by finding this means of narrating 'interesting', are drawing attention to the complexities and 'crafted' nature of the novel which situates its author and her work within "literary" parameters. It is precisely this literariness that positively contributes to Allende's

popularity in the same way that her association with the Latin American "literary" tradition of the *boom* and *post boom* does, as seen in chapter eight.

b) Temporal Dislocation: The Use of Prolepsis

Four different British readers belonging to four different groups made a mention of Allende's use of prolepsis. All four readers appeared fond of this technique since by leaping from the present to the future; readers' interest in the story is maintained according to the following Lincoln and Birmingham readers:

A: I also like the little hints she's given you, she does this quite a few times ... Years later somebody will give his life to somebody else, and I thought this was quite unusual in reading because usually they report events (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

F: She keeps your interest, like a great storyteller, by saying this may happen later, when it happens it sort of brings you back (Lincoln Library, *The House of the Spirits*).

Only one Spanish reader referred to Allende's manipulation of the temporal perspective by highlighting the absence of analepsis in her writings - or what is more commonly known as flashbacks. According to this Guadalajara reader, the absence of flashbacks makes Allende's temporal representation easy to follow, 'comprehensible' ('comprehensible') and therefore 'accessible':

Comprehensible en la forma como lo plantea porque hay libros en los que tienen el estilo de empezar por el final, luego el principio, luego mezclar y éste te lleva sola (Biblioteca de Guadalajara 2, *La casa de los espíritus*).

It is comprehensible in the way she presents it [the story] because there are books whose style is to begin with the end, then the beginning and afterwards a mix, and this one [The House of the Spirits] just carries you along.

Similarly to what was discussed in relation to the shifts in the narrative voice, although some readers were able to identify the disruption of the chronological sequence in the narrative, they used "non-literary" terms to refer to it. This suggests that they are not familiar with "literary" terminology and possibly, they are not interested in knowing about it either. This is not surprising since according to Long (1986) readers participate in reading groups voluntarily and to enjoy the experience. For this reason Long further argues that 'reading groups free members from certain kinds of instrumentalism in reading' (Long, 1986:604) and in this sense hardly any readers would be interested in 'abstract structural analysis' (*ibid*) as if they were part of a literature class. However, a limited "literary" knowledge does not automatically mean that some readers will not engage in any kind of literary analysis since what is at stake in some cases is not the author's reputation but their own as readers.

As with the changes to the narrative person, Allende's temporal dislocation techniques not only work as a good "page turner" but also position her for some readers in the realm of Literature.

c) The Visual in Allende

For some readers, the experience of reading Allende metaphorically compared to that of 'watching a movie' made up of 'vivid pictures':

A mí lo que me encanta de Isabel Allende es que la narrativa de tal forma me engancha que yo vivo todo, es decir que todo me pasa por la mente, como si fuera una película entonces yo vivo, me meto en todos los personajes (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

What I love about Isabel Allende is that I get hooked on the narrative to such an extent that I live it all, I mean, everything

goes through my mind as if it was a film, so I live it, I get inside all the characters.

B: Some very vivid pictures, I'm thinking of the portrayal at the household of Allende's family; it's such a clear image about the household (Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*).

X: I preferred the second part of the book, far more engaging and interesting than the first half, very vivid [San Francisco] great feelings about the new world. It's quite difficult for me because I've been to San Francisco so I kept picturing San Francisco as I knew it and then putting this on top, so it was a bit strange for me to read it but I really enjoyed the second part. The first part it was a bit sluggish, but I enjoyed reading it (Nottingham Reading Group 1, *Daughter of Fortune*).

It seems that by being able to imagine every detail offered by Allende's descriptions, readers are able to enter her fictional world and as a result, get involved with the characters inhabiting it. In the case of the Nottingham reader, her involvement with the story occurred because the setting was not just imaginable but familiar. She had visited San Francisco and could relate to the descriptions Allende displayed at a denotative level too. San Francisco was both, imagined and experienced as "real" in a mimetic sense. Moreover, even when Allende's descriptions do not seem to coincide with the imagined 'pictures' readers possess they are still appealing to readers because they serve as a mechanism to anchor the narrative within the realm of the "real":

Es que no te tienes que exprimir para imaginarte las cosas porque yo cada vez que leo un libro me tengo que imaginar el sitio, los personajes, las casas, los lugares, los vestidos, todo, seguro que no coincide para nada con lo que ella me está describiendo pero es mi forma de entender lo que estoy leyendo, esta mujer a mí me lo hace muy fácil. Todos los libros muy amenos (Biblioteca de Azuqueca, *Hija de la fortuna*).

You don't have to tax your brain to imagine everything because each time I read a book I have to imagine the place, the characters, the houses, the places, the dresses, everything, I'm sure it does not coincide at all with what she [Allende] is describing, but it's the way I understand what I'm reading, this woman [Allende] makes it very easy for me. All her books are very entertaining.

Sometimes this 'impression of a real world' (Thornborrow & Wareing, 1998:157) which readers can easily recognise is achieved by means of historical contextualisation as already discussed in chapter seven:

A mí me gusta mucho y sobre todo cómo describe dónde está, las guerras, todos los paisajes, toda la historia que te mete a parte de la historia que ella cuenta en el libro (Biblioteca de Azuqueca, *Hija de la fortuna*).

I like her [Allende] a lot, especially how she describes where the story is taking place, the wars, the scenery, all the history that she introduces apart from the story she's telling you in the book.

What therefore becomes central is to be able to imagine, to 'picture place and settings' (Long 1986, 605) so readers can enter the worlds described and get involved with the characters and settings. This means once more that enabling the reader to "live" the characters' worlds is at the centre of Allende's success as a novelist. Allende is "popular" because the worlds of the characters and their settings connect with the worlds of the readers. This connection is possible because of Allende's 'visual' worlds, in other words, because of her "real" worlds or 'impression(s) of a real world' (Thornborrow & Wareing, 1998:157) she manages to create for her readers.

Nonetheless, according to some readers, creating the appropriate 'visual' impression was dependant upon including the "right" amount of detailed description. They thought that 'too much' detailed information could spoil their reading experience:

B: My first impression when I was starting into it, thinking, gosh!! There's so much in it, it's so dense and so forth, every page is so rich and full (Nottingham Reading Group 2, *Eva Luna*).

F: Yes, I don't know if I would have kept reading it, if I didn't have to read it for this, the first three chapters, but further on it

was fine, just at the beginning I found it was a very dense text (Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*).

By describing Allende's novels as 'dense', these readers may have been implying that their reading pace was slow and for Nottingham reader B it meant remembering an enormous amount of facts that could be relevant later on throughout the novel.

It is difficult to determine whether or not vast amounts of detail could be generally regarded as an appealing feature for readers. Judging by most of the above readers' views, the 'visual', although sometimes 'dense' is essential as it allows most readers to partake of Allende's worlds, get involved with them, fantasise and even lose themselves in them.

d) Humour in Allende

Although few British and Spanish readers mentioned Allende's sense of humour, this constitutes an element that could contribute to readers' involvement with her writings. There is a short chapter in Allende's book interview with Celia Correas Zapata (1998) where Allende talks about the use of humour in her work. Allende recalls her years as a journalist in *Paula* magazine⁸³ as particularly influential, since in *Paula*, she was writing two humorist columns called: 'Los impertinentes' ('The Impertinents') and the feminist 'Civilice a su troglodita' ('Civilise your troglodyte'). The feminist overtones of 'Civilice a su troglodita' were confirmed by Allende when talking about her sources of inspiration:

⁸³ Allende explains that it was a coincidence that her daughter and the magazine she was working for had the same name. Her daughter Paula had been born a few years before she started working for this magazine (Allende and Correas, 1998:56).

¿Para burlarme? De los hombres, por supuesto. Son una fuente inagotable. No sabes cuán absurdo puede ser el macho chilensis. Ahora pienso que si algún hombre dijera de las mujeres las cosas que decía yo de los hombres, lo hubiéramos linchado en la calle (Correas and Allende, 1998:58).

For mockery? Men, of course. They are an insatiable source. You don't know how absurd the Chilean male can be. Now I think that if any man said about women things like the ones I said about men, we would have lynched him in the streets.

Furthermore, when Correas claims that 'Hay pocas mujeres que utilicen el humor en la literatura' (Correas, 1998:59), ('There are few women who use humour in literature'), Allende replies in this way: 'Porque tenemos que gastar el humor en sobrevivir no más. Los hombres, que se toman a sí mismos tan en serio, pueden usar el que les sobra para ganarse la vida' ('Because we have to use our humour to survive and nothing else. Men, who take themselves so seriously, can use the humour they have left over to make a living'). These words reveal Allende's feminist outlook about the use women - and by extension women writers - make of humour. For Allende, it appears that the use of humour conceals a deeper truth about the women's condition, about how difficult it can be for women to survive in a society dominated by men like the Chilean one. Nonetheless, rather than thinking that women readers connected Allende's humour to feminism, humour I believe, was instead mentioned for its entertaining qualities as clearly expressed by this Fontanar reader:

Bibliotecaria: No me río de las violaciones pero que hay cosas crudas que me hacen mucho sonreír, por ejemplo hay unas historias aquí cuando la está amortajando que se ha muerto [Clara], pues le pone unos calcetines, yo aquí ya ... es que son gotitas que a mí me gustan en el libro; que no es una cosa que estás leyendo y dices ¡hay que rollo! (Biblioteca de Fontanar, *La casa de los espíritus*).

Librarian [woman]: I don't laugh at the rapes but there are crude things that make me smile a lot, for example there are some stories here, when Clara is dead and is being wrapped in a shroud,

somebody puts a pair of socks on her, here... these are the little things I like in the book; it's not something you read and you say what a pain!

Other readers may have understood Allende's humour in similar fashion, but some British readers also saw it as a means of dealing with the unspeakable, or particularly sensitive themes:

A: It's incredibly funny, I like the line where she explains the child with Down's syndrome and she would be saying that everybody's got a lunatic locked up somewhere and the child asks if we've got somebody in the family, and she says no, we are all a little mad and there's not enough left over to make one [rest of the group is laughing] (Lincoln Library, *The House of the Spirits*).

D: In fact there's so much humour in this book, it's so funny, she does not mean it obviously but she writes with so much humour I thought (Birmingham Reading Group, *Paula*).

Although it is not clear what reader D refers to when saying, 'she does not mean it', this could be interpreted as if Allende's humour was a useful tool to soften up certain "truths", to speak what would be considered politically incorrect. For Lincoln reader A, through humour, Allende manages to "naturalise" a condition that according to this reader inadvertently becomes associated with madness. Allende is able to "normalise" it by appealing to everybody's madness as if after all there is a bit of it in all of us. Similarly, the earlier comment made by the Fontanar reader was dealing with a very sensitive topic such as death. According to this reader, Allende's intention was not to be irreverent towards death and the dead but perhaps to lighten up a topic that is intrinsically serious and solemnly treated. What is at issue here is whether to consider the above readers' responses to Allende's humour as an attempt to position her writings within the "literary" or/and as means to help readers connect to her worlds. It could be argued that Allende's humour makes her "popular" in the sense that some readers may believe that its use requires certain "literary" skills on the author's behalf. In

other words, the use of humour involves a crafting process that situates Allende in the realm of Literature. However, I feel drawn towards the argument that presents humour as a means to contribute to Allende's popularity in a different way. It allows readers to connect to Allende's worlds and be meaningful for the readers' own life experiences, in particular when readers may have to deal with sensitive issues in "real" life.

Allende's Novels as 'Accessible' Texts

In the British context, and in contrast to the idea of the 'crafted' nature of Allende's texts, some readers described Allende's novels as an 'easy read':

D: I expected this to be a lot more political, I haven't read any of hers before; I thought it was going to be heavy and it was quite a good adventure story and easy to read (Nottingham Reading Group, *Daughter of Fortune*).

A: Chatty style as well, and she's so easy to read, the amount of detail, there is a lot to remember from a 500 hundred page book, I think she's very funny, humorous, she's thought of new ways of looking at things to express herself; I think it's a marvellous read (Birmingham Reading Group 2, *The House of the Spirits*).

It is interesting to note how reader D had in mind a set of expectations prior to reading *Daughter of Fortune* which did not materialise. It appears that these expectations may have originated in the consumption of other 'extra-literary' discourses since most British readers had no experience of reading Allende in the past. It may be that the above reader's expectations were significantly influenced by public discourses that, as seen in chapter three, associate Allende and politics, constructing her image as that of a politically committed author. It seems that defining Allende in terms of an 'easy read' is also a direct consequence of the

novel's genre. By describing *Daughter of Fortune* in terms of an 'adventure', this reader is inadvertently equating 'adventure' with 'easy' as opposed to 'political' with 'difficult' or 'heavy'. Similarly, by defining Allende's style as 'chatty', the Birmingham reader draws attention to her 'accessible' and transparent language which mirrors everyday life, that is, the 'reality' that readers have experience of outside the novel, making the whole reading experience 'easy'.

This concern with 'accessible' language was particularly felt among Spanish readers since by sharing a common language with the author they could express compelling views about Allende's language choices. The following examples draw explicitly upon this element:

Yo he leído otros autores que tienen un vocabulario muy... y te echa para atrás, yo la lectura la quiero sencilla y clarita; yo creo que Isabel Allende para mí lo hace ; que si es buena o mala ahí ya no entro ni salgo; a mí me gusta y punto (Campanillas, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I have read other authors who have a vocabulary that's very... and it [the vocabulary] puts you off, I want a reading which is simple and clear; I think that Isabel Allende does this; if she's a good writer or not, I don't even go there; I like her and that's enough.

Ella escribe muy bien en castellano, la narrativa, no tiene en el vocabulario latinoamericanismos (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

She writes very well in Castilian, the narrative, it doesn't have Latin Americanisms in the vocabulary.

Para escribir de la manera que ella escribe debe haber leído muchísimo, escribe de una forma yo que sé como muy fluida, no usa modismos de allí de su tierra (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

To write the way she does, she must have read a lot, she writes, I don't know, in a very free-flowing way, she does not use idioms from her country.

Yo he leído *La casa* y lo volví a releer porque no me acordaba de nada. Es un lenguaje que cualquiera lo puede entender, que no es complicado y además te narra las cosas divinamente (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I read The House and I re-read it because I didn't remember much. It's a language that anyone could understand, it is not complicated and besides, she tells you things in a wonderful manner.

These readers make precise references to Allende's use of language that ultimately emphasise its freedom from Latin American expressions which may sound strange to a Spanish reader and which can also hinder readers' understanding. Moreover, Allende's texts are - using Barthes' terminology - 'readerly' texts rather than 'writerly', and from this perspective, they are located within the realist tradition rather than modernist or postmodernist, where language draws attention to itself and the content becomes of secondary importance (Thornborrow & Wareing, 1998). Interestingly, the groups that commented on the transparency of Allende's language were those that were originally created as literacy groups - Campanillas and El Palo. These groups' interest or attention to 'accessible' language reflects once more their own specificity as educational rather than leisure type groups. However, this was not the only way in which Allende's accessibility was understood:

Y tampoco se va mucho por las ramas como Puig o Cortázar, que para decir una cosa se enrollan y es que no tienes tiempo, la mayoría de nosotras no tenemos tiempo para leer, tenemos que sacar el tiempo como sea, yo necesito un libro que me explique, que me hable, que me lo diga claro pero no muy lento para poder cogerme otro más y no quedarme con uno toda la vida, entonces ella como es tan práctica, es muy expresiva, la entiendes y no tienes que estar pensando en lo que te está queriendo decir, ¡no, ya te lo ha dicho! (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

She does not ramble on like Puig or Cortázar, who to say something go on forever and you just haven't got the time, the vast majority of us don't have time to read, we have to make time whenever we can; I need a book which explains to me, talks to me,

says things clearly to me, but not too slow, so I can read another one and not spend all my life with the same one; in that respect she [Allende] is so practical, so expressive, you understand her and you don't have to be thinking about what she is trying to say, no, she's already told you!

I found the above words by this Spanish woman reader extremely revealing in terms of understanding Allende's success. For this reader, Allende is appealing because compared to other men Latin American authors 'no se va mucho por las ramas' ('she does not ramble on, she sticks to the point'). This means that by emphasizing its directness, this reader is being critical of the experimental novels created by the *boom* novelists such as Puig or Cortázar in which the experimental language and style used made them inaccessible for some readers. Not only this, Allende's 'accessible' style is vital to her success given the social constrictions imposed on some of these Spanish women readers – and possibly some British women readers too - as housewives and in full or part-time employment, with little time in their hands to dedicate themselves to pleasurable as well as nurturing activities such as reading. The above Palo reader – and by extension other women readers – seems to be in search of instant gratification due to the constant demands contemporary society makes upon her as a woman. Therefore, the 'classic realist' mode of representation Allende uses, prevails over others, such as the modernist or postmodernist, given that the realist code renders unproblematic the relationship established between the world of the text and the world lying outside it. Moreover, this realist code seems to be rather successful as it favours a dialogic structure between the 'world of the text' and the 'world of the reader' (Ricoeur, 1988) which in particular women readers seem to appreciate. In this respect, for some Spanish readers, Allende is "popular" in the sense that she uses 'easy' or 'obvious' ways of representing her worlds. In turn,

this 'accessibility' makes her "popular" for a different reason, for facilitating Ricoeur's 'phenomenological psychology of reading' (1988:167) where readers find Allende's worlds meaningful for their own. However, some British readers' interpretations of Allende's writings as an 'easy read' could also be read as "popular" but this time in the sense of equating her writings to "low" as opposed to "high".

a) Allende's Formulaic Writing

Another textual element highlighted by several British and Spanish readers was Allende's use of formulaic writing. John G. Cawelti defines 'literary formulas' as 'ways in which specific cultural themes and stereotypes become embodied in more universal story archetypes [...] as these fulfil man's needs for enjoyment and escape' (Cawelti, 1976: 6). Following on from Cawelti's definition, the focus some of the Leicester readers' gave to the use of formula in Allende was based on the associations formula writing has with 'subliterature or low-brow cultural forms' (*ibid*, 13) as the following comments suggest:

D: I had the feeling that this was probably going to be her best piece of work and there are elements in it that can easily become formulaic, there's something about you know, it's so characteristic, that you could think of her using one genre and selling a lot of novels ... (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

A: She's a fine writer, I think the difficulty is that her writing is similar so I don't believe it changes from a second and third novel, they are always about centrally powerful women, a variety of characters (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

C: The reviews of her latest one weren't very favourable to her because she was beginning to fit heavily into formula writing (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

Leicester reader D identifies formulaic elements in Allende but these are not specifically named. One could hypothetically think of thematic characteristics such as the central role of women, the family saga, the use of magical realism or the romance element⁸⁴ as contributing to the idea of the formulaic in Allende, as touched on by reader A. However, Leicester readers' preoccupation with formula appears to be concealing an underlying concern with issues around "literary" taste and value as implied by the references reader D made to the commercial success of formula writers or reader's C references to the negative reviews Allende's latest work received from "literary" authorities.

These readers' understanding of formula writing fits in with what are its traditional associations with "popular" forms of writing, - in the sense of "low" - since 'a major characteristic of formula literature is the dominant influence of the goals of escape and entertainment' (Cawelti, 1976:13). According to Cawelti this approach to formula writing 'tends to make us perceive and evaluate formula literature simply as inferior or perverted form of something better, instead of seeing its "escapist" characteristics as aspects of an artistic type with its own purposes and justification' (*ibid*). In this sense, some of the attention drawn to Allende's formulaic writing by some of the Leicester readers may be equally symptomatic of their anxieties as how their reading practices may be perceived

⁸⁴ Jean Radford (1986) in her introduction to *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction* offers a valuable overview of the main characteristics which define the romance as genre. Radford initially borrows concepts from Northrop Frye as well as the 'more synchronic approach' offered by John Cawelti in *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*. According to Radford, Cawelti (1976) identifies the following features of romance: '(a) the centrality of the love relationship with adventure/incident as subsidiary elements [...] (b) in women's romance, the major relationship is between heroine and hero [...] (c) most contemporary romance has a female protagonist [...] (d) romance depends on a special relationship of identification between reader and protagonist whether the narration is in the first or the third person' (Radford, 1986:11). What is interesting from Cawelti's features is that all of them could be easily transferred to Allende's writings. In this sense, it could be argued that the romance element may constitute a significant part of the formulaic nature that characterizes Allende's style.

by others if they appear to be reading formula writers like Allende, as clearly stated by reader C. Furthermore, these readers' acknowledgment of Allende's formulaic writing may be used as a distancing mechanism to set them apart and construct their self-identity as "high" and/or "middle-brow" rather than "low-brow" readers. In addition, this group's preoccupation with their self-identity as readers, may be influenced by their gender since men only groups, may be formed with a slightly different agenda to women only groups. It could well be that in the Leicester group, the "literary" needs of its members surpass their social needs and subsequently members take more pride in the cultural content and type of instruction they obtain from their membership, rather than in the social nurturance groups can offer.

In contrast to this, Spanish readers appear to understand Allende's formulaic writing in different terms:

A mí me empezó gustando al principio mucho y ahora cada vez me va gustando menos porque ya me parece muy repetitiva; pero cuando llevas leyendo mucho a un escritor sea el que sea, no sólo ella, ya al final se repiten mucho porque claro se les acaba el tema y entonces ya empiezan a repetir cosas, te acuerdas que también lo había dicho en tal libro o en el otro, los personajes se parecen y ya a mí me está gustando menos (Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2).

At the beginning I liked her [Allende] very much but now I like her less and less because she seems very repetitive; but when you've been reading any writer for a long time, not only Allende, in the end they all repeat themselves a lot because of course they run out of ideas and then they start repeating things, you start to remember that a particular thing had already been mentioned in another book, characters resemble each other and so I like her less and less.

Te cuenta la historia pero pienso que se repite un poco por lo menos en los dos libros que yo he leído por ejemplo en *Eva Luna* vuelve a repetir cuando está en la guerra, cuando está toda la lucha, los gobernantes (El Palo, *La casa de los espíritus*).

She tells you the story but I think that she repeats herself a little bit, at least in the two books I've read, for example in Eva Luna, she repeats herself when she talks about the war, all the fighting, the people in power.

A mí también me encanta cómo representa a la mujer y luego la forma de escribir aunque sea muy repetitiva, a mí me encanta porque yo que no soy muy intelectual y entonces en sus libros me entra la historia y me meto en la historia, me la creo y me gusta (Biblioteca de Guadalajara, *La casa de los espíritus*).

I also love how she represents women and also the way she writes although it's very repetitive, I love it because me, I'm not very intellectual and so in her books I'm able to get on with the story, I get inside the story, I believe it and I like it.

Among the Spanish readers, Allende's formulaic writing appears not to be associated with "popular" - in the sense of "low" - forms of writing but with repetition and causing immediate recognition of the author's themes. This interpretation could be sustained when Biblioteca de Azuqueca 2 reader makes this characteristic extensive not only to Allende but to all those novelists a reader becomes familiar with, if continuing to read his/her works. In addition, what the Guadalajara reader implies is that repetition can be safe. By playing down her intellectual capacities, and contrary to the more scholarly self-identity of the Leicester readers, this reader appears to value what would be considered Allende's "comfort zone", even if this involves going over familiar territory.

What these comments overall suggest is the

audience's satisfaction and basic emotional security in a familiar form; in addition, the audience's past experience with a formula gives it a sense of what to expect in new individual examples, thereby increasing its capacity for understanding and enjoying the details of a work (Cawelti, 1976:9).

What these contrasting interpretations may be telling us about British and Spanish readers is how differently they perceive themselves as readers or even how they want to be perceived by others. Whereas in the British context the

recognition of Allende's formulaic writing serves to construct readers' image as intellectualised and "high-brow", in the Spanish context, the emphasis is on the readers' pleasure being able to recognise certain elements in Allende that, in turn, make her 'accessible'.

Leicester readers' associations of Allende with "formula" writing make her writings undoubtedly "unpopular" since formulaic and "low" are inseparable for these readers. Conversely, for some Spanish readers, Allende's "formula" works as a safety net that puts some of the less confident readers at ease. These readers may feel more comfortable knowing in anticipation that they will be able to recognise certain cues displayed by the author. The use of formula once more makes Allende "popular" among some Spanish readers for facilitating readers' worlds' intersection with Allende's worlds. What should also be highlighted is that British and Spanish readers' responses to formula writing may be the result of the different connotations⁸⁵ attached to this concept in both research contexts.

b) Melodrama and Allende

Some readers' comments defined Allende's appeal in emotional terms: 'She writes from the heart' (Reader C, Birmingham Reading Group, *Paula*); ' Cuando hay un problema lo dulcifica mucho, entonces eso hace que llegue un poquito más al lector' (Campanillas, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('When there is a problem she sweetens it a lot, so that means that touches the reader more'); 'Su escritura suele llegar al alma, muy introspectiva, escuchas relatos pues más o menos

⁸⁵ In 'Matters of Taste: Working with Popular Culture', Jo Labanyi (2002) argues that in Spain as well as Latin American countries, the concept of 'popular culture' appears to be more attractive because of 'its organic association with pre-modern rural culture [...] as well as 'with a kind of democratisation of taste' (2002:18-19) rather than its association with "low" cultural forms in the British context.

sensaciones de ella que pues tu misma las has sentido' (Biblioteca de Guadalajara, *La casa de los espíritus*) ('Her writing reaches your soul, she's very introspective, you listen to her stories, more or less her own sensations and you have also felt the same sensations'). This last comment is perhaps the most representative to explain what the term melodramatic signifies for some British and Spanish readers. In Peter Brooks' seminal study *The Melodramatic Imagination* the author defines melodrama as the 'drama of the ordinary' (Brooks, 1976: 13) or slightly more elaborate as 'the effort to make the "real" and the "ordinary" and the "private life" interesting through heightened dramatic utterance and gesture that lay bare the true stakes' (*ibid*, 14). In addition, Ang's analysis of *Dallas* and the melodramatic imagination becomes inspiring in this instance. Ang's definition of the melodramatic imagination also based on Peter Brooks definition similarly concludes that:

The melodramatic imagination is therefore the expression of a refusal, or inability, to accept insignificant everyday life as banal and meaningless, and is born of a vague, inarticulate dissatisfaction with existence here and now (Ang, 1985:79).

What interests me from Brooks and Ang's definitions is how the 'melodramatic imagination' serves people to live and assimilate their experiences and how in particular in Ang's study viewers recognise ideas in the imaginative world of *Dallas* where 'they can "lose" themselves because the programme symbolizes a structure of feeling which connects up with one of the ways in which they [viewers] encounter life' (*ibid*, 83). These words can easily be transferred to the world of readers in which Allende's fictional worlds seem to function as a kind of therapy for some readers who by living them unconsciously assimilate their own living experiences. Ang's analysis also claims that women are more susceptible to melodrama since women are used to 'facing situations

psychologically and emotionally' (*ibid*, 82). Therefore, it is not surprising that the specific reading groups' comments engaging with emotions were made by women readers and not men. Also the fact that only one British reader had framed Allende's appeal in terms of emotional impact makes me interrogate to what extent the specificity of British and Spanish groups may have influenced the ways in which British and Spanish women readers responded to this characteristic and how they experienced pleasure.

I found the following comment rather symptomatic to further examine and understand what kind of pleasure in particular Spanish women readers experienced when reading Allende:

Pues la manera de contar las cosas, tanto de una manera realista como lo de Paula, la manera de contarlo y ya está. A mí para que me enganche un libro que cuando empiece a leerlo que para empezar me distraiga, quizás por eso Paula no me distrajo, pues a mí me gusta una lectura que aunque haya cosas reales, después que la lectura se te haga amena, entonces el vocabulario lo tienes que tú lo entiendes y como lo entiendes también me gusta (Campanillas, *La casa de los espíritus*).

The way she tells you things, in such a realist way like in Paula, the way she tells it [the story] to you, full stop. For me, to get hooked on a book, when I start reading it, it has to entertain me, maybe for this reason Paula did not entertain me, because although I like reading about real things, the reading has to be attractive, so you need to understand the vocabulary and since you understand it, you like it too.

This reader emphasises Allende's entertaining qualities as crucial for her enjoyment as a reader. But what does this reader really mean when she refers to Allende as 'entertaining'? Perhaps in similar fashion to Radway's readers, when they described the act of reading as 'relaxation' or 'escape', 'entertainment' should be understood here at two different but interrelated levels. The first level may be understood as a process by which readers feel they are being offered the possibility of being transported to a different world than their own from which

they can 'deny the present' (Radway, 1984:90). At this level the sort of 'entertainment' produced by Allende does not reside in the production of pleasure derived from the texts themselves, but on the kind of pleasure the act of reading in itself produces for women readers. Without Allende, these women readers would not have a space in which to suspend themselves from the demands that society imposes on them as women.

This 'entertainment' can also be triggered by the different processes of identification or dis-identification that some readers for example may experience with some of the characters inhabiting Allende's world – as already discussed in previous chapters. Allende's stories are presented by some readers as 'entertaining' since these texts may represent for some readers 'an enclave to which one can retreat, "be oneself"' (Ang, 1985:22). It is this "safe" space that Allende offers to readers to explore themselves that may be implicitly mostly appreciated by some of her readers. But what also matters is that this experience of pleasure is 'personal' and

based on the premise that the significance of a cultural object can differ from person to person and from situation to situation. It is based on an affirmation of the continuity of cultural forms and daily life, and on a deep-rooted desire for participation, and on emotional involvement (Ang, 1985:116).

Moreover, and according to Bourdieu, the type of pleasures produced by Allende's texts are considered "popular" as opposed to "highbrow"⁸⁶ situating the author closer to a "popular" aesthetic realm. This reading of Allende certainly makes her "unpopular" among some British readers since it would situate not only Allende but also them, as readers, in the realm of the "popular"

⁸⁶ Jo Labanyi (2002) in following Bourdieu's classification of cultural products, distinguishes 'popular' from 'highbrow' according to their 'modes of consumption' rather than 'conditions of production'. In this sense Labanyi considers 'popular' those cultural products 'being characterised by festive participation' and 'highbrow' those 'being characterised by aesthetic detachment' (2002:14).

as opposed to the "literary" or Literature. In contrast, for most Spanish readers, the 'festive participation' (Labanyi, 2002:14) achieved through the use of melodramatic elements, makes Allende "popular" since this is another feature which encourages readers' connections to Allende's worlds.

British Readers' Responses To Allende's Translated Texts

Among most British groups, reading translated versions of Allende's originals became a widely discussed issue⁸⁷. Only a few British readers expressed no reservation about reading Allende's translated versions:

A: She [the translator] must be very skilful because you have to get the whole feeling, it's a wonderful translation (Birmingham Reading Group, *Paula*).

C: It's a delight to read that, what I find interesting is that the translation, they've done on the whole a pretty good job at translation; it holds your attention because of the descriptive power (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

F: I loved the storytelling aspect of it and I loved her explanation of the story telling of it and it flows, the English flows very well even if it's a translation (Nottingham Reading Group 2, *Eva Luna*).

Despite the above positive responses, there was a general concern and underlying suspicion about not reading the original texts. This suspicion could be explained by a number of factors. To begin with, British readers are not used to reading translated fiction since:

Translated patterns since World War II indicate the overwhelming domination of English-language cultures. English has become the most translated language worldwide, but despite the considerable size, technological sufficiency, and financial stability of the

⁸⁷ *The House of the Spirits* was translated by Magda Bogin whereas the rest of Allende's novels have been translated by Margaret Sayers Peden (Correas, 1998:186)

British and American industries, it is one of the least translated into [sic] (Venuti, 1998:160).

Also due to the hegemonic status of the English language: 'translation is underpaid, critically unrecognized, and largely invisible to English-language readers' (*ibid*, 88). One of the most significant factors contributing to these readers' distrust in translation is therefore the domination and prominence of the English language. Furthermore, and according to Susan Bassnett (1996), historically, translation or the role of the translator has been associated with the betrayal of the original text and not as an interpretive exercise on the part of the translator. In this sense, translation may still contain some negative connotations for readers since 'translation has been described as "secondary", "mechanical" "derivative", a translation is a "copy", a "substitute" a poor version of the superior original' (Bassnett, 1996:12).

This idea of a translated text being a 'poorer version' of its original is also connected to the question of authorship. According to Lawrence Venuti, (1998) the concept of authorship is intrinsically associated with originality, whereas translated texts 'provoke the fear of inauthenticity, distortion, contamination' (1998: 31) and these are the kind of fears that commonly emerged among some British readers:

C: I wonder how translation has affected this, I should think the translation is good but there were times she nearly lost it and I'm wondering at the consistency of translation, I think she's very good (Leicester Reading Group, *The House of the Spirits*).

D: I wonder how much essence has been lost in translation. You always wonder that when you read a book in translation, how good the translation was, so was it her [Allende] or the translator? (Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*)

The following is an extract from Nottingham Reading Group 1 in the form of a dialogue between two of its readers:

G: When you read translations you don't know if it's the translator or author's fault.

C: The last book I read was by an Egyptian author and it was the same I couldn't tell if it was really badly translated or whether it had to do with the type of literature written.

G: The translator is supposed to kind of mirror the capabilities of the language, the original language, maybe Spanish is a very different language.

C: Sometimes when you take a foreign author and they're read and translated because they're foreign, they gain certain status that they wouldn't gain necessarily have in their own cultures. She [Allende] could be Barbara Cartland⁸⁸ in Spain or Argentina for all we know; we don't know ... I think the reason I liked her is because it makes me forget about the translation, it flows.

(Nottingham Reading Group 1, *Daughter of Fortune*)

What interested me most about the above comments was reader's C reference to the 'flow' of the English translation. This reader praised the 'flow' of the English translation and highlighted its importance in terms of facilitating her rapport with the text. This observation is also significant because it is connected with a "popular" approach to the aesthetics of translation for which readers are not required to hold special cultural competences as the texts render themselves transparent and realistic to invite vicarious participation (Bourdieu 1984; Radway 1984). The emphasis on transparency and the realistic effect of translated texts results in what Venuti has identified as 'fluent translation' (1998:12). 'Fluent translation' allows the foreign text to reach a wider pool of readers but at the same time it reinforces the major language and its many other

⁸⁸ British novelist Barbara Cartland is known 'as the Queen of Romance, writing 723 books with estimated worldwide sales of one billion copies in 36 languages'. BBC News. *Barbara Cartland dies*. [online]. Available from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk758077.stm> [Accessed 17 April 2007].

linguistic and cultural exclusions while masking the inscription of domestic value. Fluency is assimilationist, presenting to domestic readers a realistic representation inflected with their own codes and ideologies as if it were an immediate encounter with a foreign text and culture (*ibid*).

A good example of the dangers posed by the undemocratic approach of 'fluent' translation can be detected in the following example Allende uses to explain her working relationship with her translator Margaret Sayers Peden. Allende mentions the word 'destino' as a problematic word for Sayers to translate since it cannot be translated verbatim. Allende explains that 'destino' signifies fate or luck in the Spanish context but that in the Anglo-American world this word is 'loaded' since the 'Anglo Saxons feel they are very much in charge of their lives'⁸⁹. This in turn corresponds to what is currently expected from translators and translations since: 'A translation does not copy in the sense of repeating that text verbatim; rather the translation enters into a mimetic relation that inevitably deviates from the foreign language by relying on target-language approximations' (Venuti' 1998: 64). Similarly, a good translation not only depends on the 'adequacy of language used but also on the translator managing adequately to render the original's overall content, both aesthetic and conceptual' (Zlateva, 1990:34).

Also, reader C in Nottingham Reading Group 1 formulated her suspicion around Allende's translated texts as these were unable to guarantee the value of the work in the home culture. This perception may be common among British readers since by being less familiar with Latin American "literary" traditions they are less confident - as discussed in chapter eight - about how the position

⁸⁹ Holt, Pat, 2001. *Onstage with Isabel Allende, Part II* [online]. Available from: <http://www.holtuncensored.com/members/column290.html> [Accessed on 13 April 2007]

Allende holds in relation to the Latin American "literary" canon "translates" in terms of "literary" value. Nonetheless, and against this argument, it could be claimed that the translation of foreign texts can be interpreted as a sign of its "literary" and commercial value at home, rather than the opposite (Venuti, 1998:64). In this respect, reader G in Southwell Reading Group assumes that having been translated into 27 different languages, Allende's translations must be "good":

G: [paraphrased] Reader G tells the rest of the group about an article she found on the Internet, an interview where it says that Allende always uses the same translator, "so it must be accurate" and it's been translated into 27 languages (Southwell Reading Group, *Paula*).

It is hard to share this reader's particular reading of Allende's success in another 27 languages as symptomatic of a "good" translation since becoming an international bestseller brings certain implications to the aesthetics of translation. According to Venuti since bestsellers reach a mass readership, the translation will have to render itself transparent within 'potentially conflicting codes and ideologies that characterize that audience' (Venuti, 1998: 125). To be able to achieve this, bestsellers seem to employ realistic modes of representation whose ultimate success will depend on the readers' identification with characters. As already discussed and noted in chapters four, five and six, this characteristic is also important insofar as it 'addresses contemporary problems and presents imaginary solutions in terms of dominant cultural and political values' (*ibid*, 126). This is, perhaps, the essence of the success and popularity of Allende's translations: Allende's texts are emotionally appealing, dealing with 'universal' themes that are common to human nature and employing a language that is 'fluent' and does not draw attention to itself. The only downside to this is that by

reaching a world-wide transnational readership, Allende's translations may also suffer a considerable 'domestication' (*ibid*, 67). This 'domestication' occurs so readers that are as culturally apart as the British and the Spanish can make sense of Allende's worlds by inscribing their diverse domestic identities and cultural codes without losing the pleasure brought by reading foreign cultures. In this sense, translation plays a central role in constructing cultural identities, establishing stereotypes and in the creation of canons that suit the aesthetic values of the domestic culture (*ibid*). This factor, despite its importance, is perhaps the least considered among the British readers since the references made to the translation process and its adequacy had more to do with linguistic rather than a cultural and political adequacy. These are just a few examples that confirm readers' concern with the correct use of language and syntax:

B: How about the translation? Is it a good translation?

[Paraphrased] In response to this question another member in the group (reader D) selects a few words that would sound strange to a British reader. For example there was no consensus among the group members about the word "bagatelle" but they all agreed that "lacuna" sounded strange. Also the word "adobe" sounded unfamiliar and some members asked what it meant (Birmingham Reading Group, *Paula*).

E: I get normally upset about translation ... there are so many words you have to look up and that would probably be because it is a translation; I didn't find it hard to read but one or two obscure translations (Nottingham Reading Group 2, *Eva Luna*).

F: Did you find if this is a translated novelist, a lot of the translation is not good grammar is it? Rambling sentences until we get to a full stop, naïve points I don't know if this is meant or the translation (Nottingham Reading Group 1, *Daughter of Fortune*).

It is interesting to note how Birmingham and Nottingham readers identified a certain lexicon that created the effect of strangeness for their understanding. However, it appears that this choice of vocabulary created such strangeness

effect mainly because the words selected by reader D are non English words in origin and more than likely not used or heard very frequently.

Nonetheless, the following comment made by reader X in Nottingham Library appears to regard her unsuccessful rapport with Allende's translation as due to maintaining 'in its own language the foreignness of the foreign text' (*ibid*, 11) rather than for its unusual vocabulary or expressions:

X: I struggled with it, I found the topic difficult anyway probably because a lack of knowledge about Hispanic themes generally; the country where it was set I wasn't very interested in reading about it, but I did struggle with that, but it lacks something because it's translation, isn't it? And I always find books that had been translated, I find sometimes they don't come across to the English reader (Nottingham Library, *The House of the Spirits*).

For this reader, the difficulty in connecting with Allende's text does not reside in the experimental language forms or in the "high" aesthetics employed. On the contrary, what appears to be the difficulty is the ways in which a different culture is being represented. Venuti has called this process a 'process of inscription' where the translation strategy is based on the 'domestication' of the foreign text by 'inscribing linguistic and cultural values that are intelligible to specific domestic constituencies' (Venuti, 1998: 67). For the above reader, *The House of the Spirits* translated version has not been able to tap into her domestic conceptual and aesthetic values, forcing her to regard Allende's texts as "badly" translated. Nonetheless, this reader's position about Allende's translation is rather unusual since most of the British readers in this research regarded her translated versions under a more positive light and where the translation process allowed readers to appropriate the texts under the umbrella of domestic cultural values.

What all the different British readers' comments suggest is that reading Allende in translation does not necessarily make her "unpopular". What is "unpopular" here is not Allende's translated novels but the inability British readers face when, reading translated versions of originals, their endeavours to position Allende within the "high"/ "low" divide become more difficult, as in some of the readers' own words, 'Allende could be Barbara Cartland in Spain or Argentina for all we know'.

Conclusion

This chapter has analysed British and Spanish readers' responses to a series of textual elements they identified as characteristic of Allende's writings. Generally, whereas British readers were more concerned with the kind of 'aesthetic detachment' which Allende's novels could offer, Spanish groups tended to place their emphasis on Allende's 'accessibility' and the rather 'festive participation' characteristic of "popular" modes of consumption (Labanyi, 2002). As discussed earlier in the chapter, these differences between British and Spanish groups need to be understood in relation to the specificity surrounding reading groups' origins and development in both research contexts.

Common to both British and Spanish readers' comments was the absence of literary terminology when referring to Allende's crafting features. This supported the idea that most readers belonged to reading groups mainly to enjoy the experience and free themselves from any 'instrumentalism' in reading (Long, 1986), that is, reading for pleasure. British and Spanish readers commented on the change of narrative voice and how this feature was ultimately drawing

attention to the complexity of the narrative structure in some of Allende's novels. Similarly, readers discussed the disruption of the chronological order of events and how this feature mostly contributed to keep readers' interest alive.

In addition, the attention to detail alongside the visual power of Allende's language was also highlighted by readers as part of Allende's characteristic and appealing style. Readers were able to imagine Allende's fictional worlds because of the transparency – in a mimetic sense – of the language employed which, in turn, was a necessary precondition to facilitate readers' involvement with the text at an emotional level.

Another feature that caught British and Spanish readers' attention was Allende's humorous style mainly for the possibilities it offered to explore certain sensitive issues or themes. On the whole, all of these features framed Allende's novels as "popular" – not in the sense of "low" - but rather in the sense that these features facilitated Ricoeur's 'phenomenological psychology of reading' (1988:167) where readers' worlds intersected with Allende's worlds.

Also contributing to this intersection of readers' and author's worlds was Allende's use of melodrama. The melodramatic element became significant among mostly Spanish readers because it offered them the possibility in a kind of therapeutic way to recognise, live and assimilate their own life experiences in the fictional world of Allende, elevating their 'insignificant existence' to the realm of the meaningful (Ang, 1985). Equally important, in particular for some Spanish women readers, was Allende's transparent language by using a realistic mode of representation. This characteristic appeared to be connected to the 'melodramatic' element since a 'realist' mode of representation appeared to allow readers to experience 'vicarious' pleasure (Radway, 1984) by recognising

and negotiating their own conflicts in an imaginary world as well as acting as a compensatory solution in response to the demands society imposes on women.

Another important element discussed by British and Spanish readers was Allende's use of formula writing. Whereas in the Spanish context the concept of formula was understood in positive terms, as a sign of entering Allende's "comfort zone", in the British context, this feature was treated suspiciously, as it associated Allende's novels with "popular" - in the sense of "low" - rather than "literary" or "high" forms.

Finally, British comments regarding Allende's translated texts also formed an important cluster that stressed the importance given to this feature by British readers. British responses towards translation were at times wary. As noted in the chapter, this was the result of many conflating factors such as the hegemonic status of the English language, the association established between originality and authorship, the fears of 'domestication' of foreign texts and finally the suspicion created by translated 'bestsellers' like Allende's. Despite all these factors, British concerns resided in the difficulty translated works created for readers' positioning of a foreign author within the "high" / "low" divide. This sometimes signified an obstacle for readers' full enjoyment of her work.

Conclusion

The Readership Perspective On Allende's "Formulae" Of Success

Introduction

In this thesis, I have aimed at understanding Isabel Allende's popularity primarily through the different responses given by British and Spanish reading groups to her writings and discourses that surround her public representation.

In this conclusion, I re-assess the contribution this research has made to the field of Allende's studies. In particular how the readers' perspective on Allende's popularity can be considered innovative and moving beyond the textual approach followed by most scholar work done on the author and her novels. Equally innovative is the methodological contribution made by this thesis. This conclusion discusses how the use of reading groups - as opposed to focus groups - signifies an advance to the methodological approaches traditionally employed when working with readers and/or viewers.

A motivating question initially was how far other readers' fascination with Allende has been generated by the same or similar features that I also found appealing about her writings and public representations. This thesis has shown how the readers in my sample have shared many of the aspects that also fascinated me and in this conclusion I critically summarise such findings. To achieve this, I trace the different ways in which Allende as a writer and as a public figure appeals to her audience. How far can we explain Allende's appeal

by reference to the commercial production of her work and public image, that is, Allende's 'authorial strategies' and that of her publishers? The producer's perspective is limited and neglects the role of textual features and readership as I argued in the introduction. For this reason, I also consider in this conclusion how far Allende's skills as a writer can explain her success. In Ricoeur's terms, how successful are Allende's 'strategies of persuasion' (1988:159)? This is crucial to understand her popularity but in the end, it is equally insufficient, as the key argument of this thesis is that the readers' perspective is the one that explains best Allende's appeal. This is possible because this is the only approach that incorporates how readers read and respond to the production of Allende's public images and discourses around her public representation. Moreover, this readers' approach includes the textual perspective since in the act of reading itself readers respond to the author's 'strategies of persuasion' creating dialogues between readers and authors and where readers make sense of their readings and relate them to their everyday lives.

A Readerly Approach to Allende

As noted in the introduction as well as in chapters one and three, Allende's status as an international best seller has often framed her popularity just in terms of commercial success. However, such approach neglects the importance of other moments within the 'cultural circuit' and offers a rather simplistic view on what Allende's popularity may signify. In the introduction of this thesis, it was acknowledged that the extensive critical body of texts on Allende's works had taken into account the moment of the text itself, of the features that characterise

Allende's novels. Among the features that Allende's scholarly research particularly paid attention to was the study of the women characters and whether or not Allende could be considered a feminist writer. However, this textual approach to Allende's texts equally felt short as it did not incorporate readers or more specifically, what features in Allende's novels connected her work with readers and their everyday lives. The approach taken in this thesis argued for an understanding of Allende's popularity in which readers were the focus and where not only texts but also production and consumption – readers and their everyday lives – became central to the analysis of her popularity.

As shall be seen in the following sections of this conclusion, the final remarks on Allende's popularity take into account the complexities of the term "popular" - as seen in chapter one - as well as how the different approaches to the "popular" intertwine with every moment in the 'cultural circuit'.

Reading Groups and Method

An innovative part in this thesis has been the ways in which Allende's readers have been studied. By researching Allende's readers through reading groups, such methodological approach has strengthened the claim that Allende's popularity is impossible to explain by means of textual analysis only. Not only this, the use of reading groups as the main methodological tool was important for several reasons. As opposed to focus groups, reading groups had not been artificially created for the set purpose of this thesis. On the contrary, the long history of most of the groups, offered me the opportunity to enter their reading public's microcosms and establish the similarities and differences existing

between the British and Spanish reading groups contexts. The specificity surrounding each of the reading contexts undoubtedly gave me a privilege insight into what elements may have affected their responses to Allende's texts from a collective rather than individual basis. Such insights would have been unfeasible if focus groups would have been used as the main methodological tool in this research. Not only this, reading groups created a less hierarchical research environment where no theoretical perspective was being imposed from the top. It was readers' comments what informed my analytical framework. In other words, such approach to reading was of great value because it did not allege to produce "truth" but to produce insights into why Allende's writings were so meaningful to the lives of particular groups of readers, that is, the women in the groups. The reading groups set up offered women readers the opportunity to make sense of a number of everyday life issues which Allende successfully dealt with in her writings. Since Allende's writings helped women readers in the groups – and sometimes men too - to make sense of themselves and of who they are, such methodological approach lent itself to examining readers' responses through gender. In connection to this, and as seen throughout the analysis of readers' responses in previous chapters, Spanish readers in particular discussed the centrality of women characters in *The House of the Spirits*. The emphasis some Spanish groups had placed on the importance of Allende's central female characterization could be explained by the groups' gender composition but equally important were the groups' origins. As already discussed in chapter two, Spanish reading groups educational background had an influence on how certain readings were favoured and to a certain degree encouraged by the librarian-moderator in the groups. Special emphasis was placed on how Allende's women

characters were represented in her novels. According to some Spanish women readers' responses, women characters' "extra" appeal resided in their leading roles of influence, in their capacity to fulfil themselves as women without denying their own femininity, and most important of all, because they offered women readers the opportunity to explore their own subjectivities. Interestingly though, this reading of Allende also reveals that as a writer, she possesses an understanding of her women readership. Allende offers her women's readers a feminine model that can potentially satisfy women from different social and national backgrounds for retaining women's femininity and empowering them at private and public levels. This means that Allende's success in creating women role models which work for different women are based on a compromise. These do not exclude typical feminine attributes such as intuition and love but successfully integrates them within the pressures women undergo in the realm of the public.

Allende's Popularity: Successfully Producing Appealing Public Images

Isabel Allende is undoubtedly "popular" in the sense that she sells millions of books. Her commercialised production, although insufficient to explain her international success, reminds us about an important aspect: her 'celebritisation' (Evans, 2005). Selling Allende's public image has become as important as selling what she writes. Allende's public images, and discourses around her as a personality, contribute to her "literary" success. As discussed in chapter three, Allende's complex set of public discourses surrounding her public

representations include references to her physical appearance, the unveiling of her private and "real" self - and how this private realm informs her fiction - the relevance granted to her family name and its connection to Chilean politics, and her position in relation to Latin American "literary" traditions. All of these combined, result in a rather attractive public image that could succeed in awakening readers' interest in her writings. However, the production of Allende through the media, does not take account of the experience of reading her novels. This perspective cannot explain, for instance, the attraction readers experience when reading Allende. In my experience as an Allende reader, it was crucial that I enjoyed *The House of the Spirits* first time round. This is what made me read more of her works. More generally, my research shows why readers continue reading Allende for the qualities of her writing, or in Ricoeur's own terms, Allende's 'strategies of persuasion' (1988:159).

Allende's Popularity: Successfully Connecting with Readers' Worlds

a) Characters

One of the most successful features of Allende's writings was her engaging characters as discussed in chapters four, five and six. However, there was a paradox in how British and Spanish readers responded to Allende's characters. On the one hand, readers connected with Allende's characters mainly due to their realistic status and coherence within the narrative but on the other, some of these characters appeared to be attractive to readers due to their unconventionality or

exoticism. For readers, characters' realistic status, that is, being able to recognise Allende's fictional constructions in the "real" world outside fiction, was achieved through detailed physical descriptions, inner conflicts and 'genuineness' (Ang, 1985). Especially, characters' inner conflicts were crucial in the making of realistic characters as well as being a sign of 'round' and psychologically motivated characters, a feature notably appreciated among British and Spanish readers alike. In addition to this, for most readers Allende's characters had integrity, as their behaviour was the result of their own circumstances. For example, readers' discussions on Esteban Trueba's violent behaviour were a good example of this. Several Spanish readers made allowances for Trueba's ruthless behaviour because it was congruent within the role he represented, that is, of a paternalistic *patrón*. Trueba, the *patrón*, could not have been or behaved in any other way. For this reason, Spanish readers, in particular, had no trouble in regarding him as "right" within the moral system of the novel (compare to Carroll, 1996).

On the other hand, other less realistic or unconventional characters like Clara del Valle also attracted readers. For example, according to British and Spanish responses, Clara del Valle's appeal resided in her spirituality, although this was controversial, not only for its connections with the 'preternatural world' (Bennett, 1998:357) but also for its unconventionality when fulfilling her roles as dutiful mother and wife. Most British and Spanish readers understood Clara's spirituality also in terms of passivity, as if unable to stand up against the abuses of patriarchal rule. However, some Spanish readers saw in this quality a liberating means to fight oppression. For some Spanish readers, Clara had demonstrated with the help of spirituality that she was in control of her own life,

despite her apparent submission to patriarchal rule. Nonetheless, what perhaps made some British and Spanish readers dislike Clara more than others, was the difficulty they found in trying to relate to her. Clara was not being regarded as "real", as readers could not imagine other "Claras" inhabiting the "real" world they know about and have experience of. It is for this reason that other female characters such as Eliza Sommers in *Daughter of Fortune* or Isabel Allende in *Paula* were comparatively speaking more widely accepted or liked than Clara. For this reason, another aspect of Allende's success connecting with the readers' worlds was about readers being able to get involved with the characters. This involvement worked at two different levels, denotative and emotional. Whereas British and Spanish readers' involvement at a denotative level - that is, experiencing similar worlds as the character - was not necessary to connect or get involved with them, emotional involvement was at the heart of readers' successful relationship with Allende's characters. Characters' realistic status was once more crucial in facilitating these processes of involvement. In my experience reading Allende, *The House of the Spirits* in particular helped me understand the experiences some members of my Chilean family had to endure during Chile's political turmoil in 1973 and its aftermath. The suffering and helplessness the character of Alba had to undergo in *The House of the Spirits* enabled me to make sense of the accounts told by a person I knew in the "real" world. He was a member of my Chilean family who had to flee from Chile in 1987 and live in exile in Spain. Allende's ability to connect Alba's worlds with my own as reader, or in Ricoeur's (1988) terms, how the 'world of the text' connected and added significance to 'the world of the reader', was in my experience one of the key elements of her appeal as a writer.

This connection, though, is possible because readers only need a 'subjective' experience of Allende's worlds, a 'structure of feeling' (Ang, 1985:45) which involves 'the imaginary occupation of other subject positions – realistic or not – which are outside the scope of every day social and cultural identities' (Ang, 1997:163). For this reason, although most readers did not regard Clara as a realistic image because of her unconventionality, she, nonetheless, facilitated women readers' imaginary adoption of new subject positions outside the identities society imposes on them as women.

Also, when reading *Paula*, I remember I first felt particularly drawn by Allende's public declarations about her daughter's illness and subsequent death. These public declarations situated Allende in the realm of the "real". She was after all a "real" human being experiencing "real" issues and emotions. As with most women readers in this research, Allende's private and public lives conflated into one. This was possible because Allende's most poignant moments during her daughter's illness and death were being publicly shared. This, in turn, created a blur surrounding what was "true" and what was fiction in *Paula*. What was so appealing about this blur was that, while reading *Paula*, I was under the impression that I was a step closer to get to know the "real" Isabel Allende.

What surprised me, though, is that this sense of intimacy with Allende's "real" self is what enabled the women readers in this research to judge her morally. Most of them identified or dis-identified with her at an emotional level in her roles as mother and wife and more importantly, through *Paula*, some readers found answers to negotiate their own similar situations in "real" life. Allende's experiences felt really close to them. In this respect, Allende was "popular" because the themes and emotions that *Paula* mobilised were

meaningful for these women. In Ricoeur's terms, Allende was "popular" because Allende's worlds 'affected' the readers' worlds and readers could find in them significance for their own daily lives, as I did with Alba in *The House of the Spirits*.

Overall, Allende's strength in relation to characterization lay in securing readers' emotional involvement with the characters and their actions. Like most British and Spanish readers, I felt attracted to Allende's characters because I was able to connect with them at an emotional level. However, what some of the readers' responses revealed was that their involvement with characters equally included those holding realistic status as well as those unconventional or exotic. What this showed me is how the unconventional characters in Allende could also be engaging or more importantly, how this unconventionality could open a space where readers could safely 'act out their fantasies' (Ang, 1997: 162). According to Ang, and as mentioned earlier on, what this 'act of fantasising' does, is to allow readers to 'imaginarily occupy other subject positions which are outside the scope of our [sic] everyday social and cultural identities' (1997: 163). This is why characters as unconventional as Clara del Valle offer readers an unconstrained space in which to either explore new identities or re-assert old ones. This is also how Allende's feminism becomes apparent. Through her array of women characters, Allende is able to get women readers – sometimes men too - emotionally engaged so they are in a position to explore "new selves" – although it may be at an imaginary level. More important though, is that through such experience, women readers make sense of their readings and relate them to their own lives, to what is meaningful for them. In this sense, Allende

enables women readers to explore themselves as women and come out with satisfactory solutions for their own lives.

b) The Historical

As with characterisation, readers appreciated Allende's historical references because they created the illusion of situating her narratives as "truth" or as "real", which in turn facilitated readers' involvement with them. British and Spanish readers' involvement with the historical was possible because readers were able to relate to the historical situated worlds depicted, which although different or distant to their own worlds, were still consistent within themselves. On some occasions though, British readers' involvement with Allende's historical representations was less successful due to, according to some British readers, the emotional distance created by the limited knowledge they admitted to possessing on Latin American history. This was apparent in the comments made by Nottingham Reading Group 2 about the German references in *Eva Luna*. This was particularly intriguing since, like most Spanish readers, I had never experienced such emotional distance some British readers referred to when reading Allende. Allende's Latin American worlds of dictatorships, guerrillas or disappeared made perfect sense within my own knowledge – although also limited - of Latin American histories.

British and Spanish readers equally made explicit reference to the importance temporal and space markers held in situating Allende's novels within a particular historical period. These temporal and spatial references were also instrumental in securing Allende's truthfulness, accuracy and veracity to reality and history. In *Daughter of Fortune* and *Paula*, these increased the illusion of a

transparent relationship between reality, history and fiction, whereas confronted with the lack of them, some British readers experienced confusion about situating *The House of the Spirits* as in the case of the Bingham Reading Group whose members initially thought that Argentina was its setting, instead of Chile. What was fascinating about readers' confusion was that what seemed obvious to me or to most Spanish readers, that is, *The House of the Spirits'* historical context, did not necessarily mean it was that apparent for some British readers. More importantly, what this confusion revealed was that Allende's novels worked for readers regardless of any contextual and/or historical inaccuracies. This was possible because British readers' involvement with the story as a whole was at an emotional rather than also at a denotative level.

A more powerful argument to situate the historical among those key elements contributing to Allende's popularity is one that makes sense of the historical as an 'ideology of instruction and self-improvement' (Long, 1987). Most Spanish readers – especially women - as well as some British, explicitly appreciated the "value" added to their readings when historical references became a prominent feature, which not only entertained, but also educated them. Allende's educational "value" resided in readers' discovery of other countries and peoples' "real" histories. This discovery was possible because even when readers were asked to imagine unknown worlds such as the nineteenth-century Californian gold rush in *Daughter of Fortune* or twentieth-century Chilean social and political history in *The House of the Spirits*, these worlds were presented as plausible within their own settings. Moreover, Spanish readers' emphasis on Allende's novels' instructive nature needs to be understood within the Spanish groups' specificity. Most of the women readers in the Spanish groups were

particularly drawn by this aspect because Allende's stories satisfied their educational aspirations. Such aspirations were probably reminiscent of the literacy groups set up, which in the case of some of the groups had evolved and transformed into what they currently are: reading groups. In this respect, a feminist reading of Allende does not get reduced to allowing women to explore their subjectivities. It also becomes significant as the historical references in Allende's writings empower particular groups of women readers by offering them a means to continue their education in a pleasurable way.

c) Allende's "Unpopular" Features

Acting as a counterbalance to the popularity the characters and the historical brought to Allende's novels, was the magical element in *The House of the Spirits*. Whereas the historical meant reliability and truthfulness on behalf of the author and her work, the "magic" or magical realism signified the opposite, especially among British readers. What initially emerged as problematic with Allende's use of magical realism was the impact this aspect had on readers' genre expectations. Rather unanimously, British readers – and some Spanish – could not come to terms with the fact that if 'the entire narrative of *La casa de los espíritus* is a device for the recounting of the story of the military coup' (Boyle, 1995: 107), there was therefore no use in employing magical realism to successfully 'recount' this story. On the contrary, the "magic" seemed to undermine all the efforts the characters and historical references had placed in presenting "real" socio-historical accounts as truthful. Most British readers' sceptical relationship with "magic" was also connected to the ambivalent relationship they had with the character Clara del Valle. Since most British and

Spanish readers saw Clara's 'magical' side as preventing her from fulfilling her qualities as dutiful mother and wife, and not as a means of asserting her own individualism, similarly, the 'magical' was perceived as an obstacle for the historical processes to materialise. Although to my surprise, there was no possibility for British readers to be reconciled with the 'magical', some Spanish readers seemed to be prepared to make allowances and accept the 'magical' as an integral part of the same narrative. Perhaps the latter understood, as I did, that the 'magical' had its function in the narrative and that 'it diminished in the story when it no longer served a useful social function for women' (Bennett, 1998: 359). In other words, the 'magical' is abandoned by Alba because as a character, Allende realises that by Alba being in the public, in the world of politics and trying to implement change in society at large, the 'magical' could not possibly serve the same function as it did within the family microcosms where Clara's resistance operated. Nonetheless, Spanish readers' more receptive attitude towards the 'magical' in Allende can also be explained by the influence that specific systems of beliefs attached to specific cultural traditions exercise on readers' acceptance or rejection of the 'magical' element. In this respect, the different responses British and Spanish readers showed towards the 'magical' element had not only been conditioned by "literary" generic conventions as I initially thought, but also by deeper interpretations of what constitutes reality. Therefore, it may be interesting to explore in further work how far the acceptance or rejection of the 'magical' element is connected to the dominant forms of religion in both countries.

Allende's Popularity: Successfully Crossing The "Literary" "High/ "Low"

Divide

As noted in chapter one, the "popular" is sometimes defined as opposed to "high" and equated with "low" cultural forms. Allende's popularity in the sense of where she belonged within the "high" ("literary") / "low" ("popular") dichotomy was also determined by the position British and Spanish readers thought she held within the Latin American and British "literary" traditions. As seen in chapter eight, Allende's associations with Gabriel García Márquez's iconic *One Hundred Years of Solitude* boosted her popularity since Márquez has become the utmost representative of the Latin American "literary" tradition of the *boom*. Nonetheless, at a practical level, British and Spanish readers also realised that Allende did not quite belong in this tradition mostly for her accessible style compared to Márquez. What surprised me was that several Spanish readers had described Allende's magical realism as 'deficient imitation' compared to Márquez's model. I felt this particular view was influenced by authoritative voices – the librarian-moderators in the groups – or other 'extra-literary' discourses rather than by readers' conviction of Márquez's finer "literary" skills. Similarly, most British readers considered Márquez's magical realism 'better' than Allende's. This time, however, British readers' assumptions about Márquez's finer "literary" skills as a magical realist were based on Márquez's ability to fulfil readers' generic expectations better than Allende. British readers' experience of Márquez was more positive, because although readers inhabited "unreal" or 'magical' worlds, they were not forced to constantly move from the 'magical' to the "real" as it happened with Allende.

Interestingly, in the British context, some readers established further parallels between Allende and other British authors. This was symptomatic of readers' anxieties about asserting "literary" value in what they read. British readers drew upon the more familiar but very different parameters of Angela Carter, Charles Dickens and Louis de Bernières. The question is how effectively British readers' associations of Allende with British authors helped readers to better position Allende within the "high" / "low" divide. There is no straightforward answer to this, although what their associations revealed was some British groups' endeavours to culturally legitimate their reading groups' practice as well as their reading choices. For Spanish readers though, since Allende was a given reading choice by a cultural authority, there was no need for readers to question her "literary" value. This does not necessarily mean that readers would not critically compare Allende and Márquez's works on a "literary" basis. According to most Spanish readers, Márquez had demonstrated his 'better' magical realist skills, although like me, readers may have enjoyed the experience of reading Allende more than Márquez. What totally puzzled me initially was British readers' intense need to position Allende in terms of "literary" criteria. Perhaps since I had discovered Allende within the cultural parameters of University curricula, I initially never questioned Allende as a legitimate reading choice. However, 'what' and 'whom' British readers read determined their self-identity as "highbrow" competent readers. A relatively unknown author such as Allende could be a risky choice, so it was a priority for most British readers to ensure where Allende belonged within the "high"/ "low" divide. This interest in locating Allende was also linked to the nature of the British groups. As noted in chapter two, British readings included mostly

authors whose "literary" reputation was legitimised by most of them having won "literary" awards. These awards could include some as prestigious and internationally recognised as the Nobel Prize, as well as the less internationally far-reaching 'Orange' prizes. For most British readers, Allende was completely unknown and, once read, her "literary" status was ambiguous making most British readers feel unease with such a choice.

Another important set of elements acknowledged by British and Spanish readers that contributed to situate Allende's within the "high" / "low" divide corresponded to those characteristics readers established as part of Allende's "literary" craft. British and Spanish readers alike equally praised what I identified as the move from third person narrative to first person, the use of prolepsis, the visual image of what is represented, the use of humour, accessible language and melodrama. Within this heterogeneous group of characteristics, there are however, certain distinctions that need to be addressed in relation to the two different research contexts. The most striking differences emerged in relation to what British and Spanish readers respectively understood in terms of accessibility and formula writing. Spanish readers understood Allende's accessible style, first, in linguistic terms, that is, by Allende employing a version of the Spanish language free from Latin American expressions. Secondly, in terms of how the message was communicated straightforwardly, by Allende using a realist code of representation that rendered unproblematic the relationship established between the world of the text and the world lying outside it. In contrast to this, some British readers equated Allende's accessibility with 'easy read', not intending to discredit Allende's literariness, but as means of highlighting the close relationship there is between certain generic forms – such

as adventure stories - and accessibility. British and Spanish readers also differed significantly in their understanding of what formula writing meant. Whereas in the Spanish context, this aspect was understood strictly in terms of accessibility, as it created in readers a sense of ease, of knowing in advance what was in store for them, in the British context, it meant associating Allende's writing with "low" cultural forms. For some British readers Allende was therefore a "popular" author in a negative sense, for her use of formula writing although readers' connections of Allende with other British writers such as Angela Carter, Charles Dickens or Louis de Bernières suggested the opposite, since in "literary" terms their works are not being regarded as "low" or formulaic.

It is important to remember that these differences between British and Spanish responses are tightly connected to the groups' origins, ethos, gender and to a certain degree class too. Whereas the British groups had a tendency to project a self-image of intellectual "high" and/or "middle-brow" readers, ready to emulate 'the aesthetic detachment' (Labanyi, 2002:14) which characterises "highbrow" taste, the Spanish groups however, framed their reading experience as a kind of therapy which worked by inhabiting Allende's fantasy worlds and allowing readers to unconsciously assimilate their own living experiences.

A Recipe for Success: Allende's Multiple Appeals

Allende's popularity is made up of a combination of elements that this thesis' readerly approach has revealed. This readerly approach has also offered me a privileged access to understanding how Allende's popularity works. This thesis has shown that Allende has an understanding of her readership. She knows how

to satisfy readers by including a diverse, even sometimes contradictory set of elements in her writings. To her realistic characters, settings and plots, Allende adds on magical realist touches to appeal to those readers for whom the unconventionality of magical realist worlds and characters, offers them an opportunity to explore new subject positions. Moreover, certain features of Allende's female representation are salient particularly to women readers. Allende is "popular" among women because her female characters – although unconventional at times – are not representing transgressive feminine models. These are transgressive, as far as most of them manage to subvert patriarchal structures in society. However, their appeal equally resides on Allende keeping intact certain attributes considered typically feminine such as intuition, sensitivity or love. This balanced combination of the transgressive and non-transgressive is what allows women readers to find Allende's worlds meaningful to their lives. Not only this, Allende also maximises her appeal by mixing among other 'strategies of persuasion' elements that either situate her writings as "literature" – in the sense of "high" - such as the use of magical realism or the change of narrative person or as "popular" – in the sense of "low" – for using formulaic structures or for her melodramatic touches. Her "literary" success, therefore, consists in crossing the "high" / "low" divide and by holding an intermediate position that at times readers find difficult to identify. Finally, Allende's authorial strategies also play an important role in explaining her success. Allende's public images and discourses not only aim at satisfying a 'meet the author' culture (Moran, 2000:149) but they fulfil a more important objective. They create a "real" and appealing public image of the author whose function is to ultimately awake readers' interest in her writings. In Allende's

case, readers' interest is generated by the illusion created by the media when unveiling her private "real" self, sometimes in a contradictory manner. In doing this, Allende and her publishers are maximising her public appeal. This is achieved by offering readers different facets of the same personality. Individual reader's attraction could either lay on Allende's commitment to politics or in her "ordinary" but "exotic" family background.

Having come to the end of this research journey, I hope this thesis has fulfilled its initial objectives in achieving a better understanding from a readers' perspective of the inner workings of Allende's popularity. Nonetheless, and despite having fulfilled its set goals, this research journey has also hinted at future avenues worth exploring. To begin with, some of the fascinating responses and reading positions the only men reading group in this research contributed with, made me interrogate to which extent a readers' approach to Allende's texts with male "only" reading groups would successfully help exploring male readers' masculinities.

A slightly different approach to readers, would be an analysis centred on Allende's younger readers after her most recent trilogy publication of the *City of the Beasts* (2002), *Kingdom of the Golden Dragon* (2003) and *Forest of the Pygmies* (2004) aimed at her "new" adolescent rather than established adult public. It would be fascinating to explore Allende's popularity among these specific groups of young readers to determine comparatively if the different set of ingredients that emerged as crucial for Allende's success with adult readers may change within groups of a different age composition.

Appendix

Electronic Survey: Questions Directed To British And Spanish University Academics

Dear Colleague,

It would be really appreciated if you devote a few minutes of your time to read and answer this email. I am currently doing some research about Isabel Allende's 'popularity' and readership. In this process I would find it most helpful if you could answer the following:

1. Do you teach Isabel Allende in any of the modules you offer? If yes, could you give me the module title and which department/school it belongs to? If no, please go to question 5.
2. Is she taught at undergraduate or postgraduate level? Or both? If yes, Which?
3. Do students have to read any of her works? Which?
4. For approximately how long has Isabel Allende been taught?
5. If Isabel Allende is not currently part of the programme, was she part in the past? Can you remember how long ago? What are the reasons she is not taught any longer?

Thanks very much for your time and co-operation.

Estimado/a colega:

Le agradecería enormemente que dedicara unos minutos de su tiempo a leer este correo y contestar a las preguntas. No le llevará más de cinco minutos hacerlo.

Actualmente estoy realizando un proyecto de investigación sobre la popularidad de la escritora chilena Isabel Allende. Como parte de este proceso me sería de gran ayuda el que contestara a las siguientes preguntas:

1. ¿Se enseña a Isabel Allende en alguno de los módulos que se ofertan en su departamento? Si es así ¿podría proporcionarme el título del módulo en cuestión y el departamento al que pertenece?
2. ¿Se la enseña también a nivel postgraduado – cursos de doctorado, master, ... etc?
3. ¿Es obligatorio para los estudiantes leer alguna de sus obras? ¿Cuál de ellas?
4. ¿Durante cuánto tiempo aproximadamente lleva Isabel Allende formando parte del programa docente?
5. Si en la actualidad Isabel Allende no forma parte del programa docente, ¿ha formado parte de éste en el pasado? ¿Puede recordar cuánto hace de ello y cuáles han sido las causas por las que se ha dejado de enseñar?

Muchas gracias por su tiempo y colaboración.

Blanca Calvo's Questions for a Small Survey Among Thirty Public

Libraries and Their Reading Groups

1. ¿Cuántos clubes tenéis? (How many reading groups do you have?)
2. ¿De qué tipo son (niños/ adultos/ en otras lenguas/ con colectivos concretos/ composición por sexos)? (What type of groups are they (children/ adults/ in other languages / with specific target audiences/ according to gender)?)
3. ¿Qué tipo de monitores se hacen cargo? (What kinds of coordinators take part?)
4. ¿Dónde conseguís los libros? (Where do you obtain your book copies?)
5. Si son propios (los libros) ¿Cuántos tenéis aproximadamente (títulos y cantidades por título)? (If you own your books, how many do you have approximately (titles and number of each)?)
6. ¿Prestáis los libros a otras instituciones? (Do you lend your books to other institutions?)
7. ¿Hacéis actividades complementarias? ¿De qué tipo? (Do you offer other activities linked to the reading groups? What kind?)
8. Además de todo eso, contadme lo que os parezca interesante. Me gustaría ofrecer datos muy completos. Muchísimas gracias. (In addition to all this, tell me anything that you may consider interesting. I'd like to offer as much detailed data as possible. Many thanks.)

Reading Group Questionnaire Distributed To The British Groups

About the group

1. How long has your group been going?

2. How did it start? (one person, a group of friends, did you all know each other beforehand?)

3. What made you want to join?

4. Does membership remain constant? Is there a waiting list?

5. How often do you meet, and how many usually attend?

6. Where do you meet (each other's homes?), and for how long?

7. Do you serve food and/or drink? Do you make time for social chat before or after the group?

8. Is the group all men/all women/mixed?

9. What is the average age of the group (roughly)?

10. Are you in a rural, urban or suburban area?

11. Have some of you been in higher education? Please give a rough percentage.

12. Are you in paid work, and if so, full-time or part-time? Again, please give rough percentages.

What you read

13. Please tick the categories you have read in your group:

Fiction, contemporary

Fiction, 20th-century

Fiction, pre-20th-century

Non-fiction, biography, memoirs

Poetry

Other (please specify)

14. Which categories have you read most of?

15. Do you read more books by men or by women, or would you say that the sex of the author is not important to you?

16. How do you choose what to read?

17. Is the price of the book important when you are choosing? Do you mainly borrow or buy?

18. How do you structure your discussions? Do you have a leader; how is s/he chosen; do you have discussion notes or use readers' guides?

19. Does your discussion tend to stick to the text or range more widely? If so, what sorts of issues come up?

20. Please list ten books you've recently read in the group, or alternatively include a list of your reading history when finish answering this questions.

21. Could you name one book which went well and explain why?

22. Could you name one book which went badly and explain why?

Appendix

23. Do most group members manage to finish the book?

24. What do you enjoy most about your reading group?

25. Has the group changed at all since its beginnings? If so, in what ways?

Thanks very much for you time and co-operation.

Reading Group Questionnaire Distributed To The Spanish Groups

Sobre el grupo

1. ¿Cuánto tiempo lleva funcionando el grupo?
2. ¿Cómo empezó? (una persona organizó el grupo, un grupo de amigos/as, ¿se conocían los miembros del grupo antes de formarlo?)
3. ¿Qué le empujó a formar parte de un grupo de lectura?
4. ¿ Ha habido cambios en cuanto a las personas que empezaron y los que actualmente continúan asistiendo a las reuniones? ¿Hay personas en lista de espera para formar parte del grupo?
5. ¿Con qué frecuencia se reúnen y cuántos son?
6. ¿Dónde se reúnen y cuánto tiempo dura la reunión aproximadamente?
7. Durante la reunión ¿Se sirve algo de beber o comer? ¿Se habla de otras cosas antes o después de discutir la lectura?
8. ¿Es el grupo masculino, femenino o mixto?
9. ¿Cuál es la media de edad del grupo aproximadamente?
10. ¿Se encuentra el grupo en un área urbana, suburbana o rural?
11. ¿Cuántos miembros en el grupo han realizado estudios universitarios? (Proporcione un porcentaje aproximado)
12. Si los miembros del grupo trabajan, ¿cuántos lo hacen a tiempo completo y cuántos a tiempo parcial? (Proporcione un porcentaje aproximado)

Sobre lo que se lee

13. Por favor marque con una cruz las categorías que se han leído en el grupo hasta ahora:

Ficción contemporánea

Ficción del S.XX

Ficción anterior al S.XX

Biografía

Poesía

Otros (Por favor especifique)

14. ¿Cuáles de las categorías anteriores han sido las más leídas?

15. ¿Como grupo, se leen más libros cuyos autores son mujeres u hombres? ¿Es importante para el grupo el sexo del autor a la hora de escoger un libro?

16. ¿Cómo eligen qué leer?

17. ¿Es el precio del libro importante a la hora de elegirlo? Habitualmente, ¿compran o piden prestados los libros?

18. ¿Cómo se organizan/estructuran las discusiones sobre las lecturas? ¿Hay alguna persona que modere la discusión? ¿Cómo se elige? ¿Se utilizan guías de lectura en las discusiones? ¿Se toman notas individualmente para luego discutir las en común?

19. ¿Se centra la discusión en la lectura o se tiende a divagar? Si es así, ¿qué tipo de temas surgen?

20. Por favor enumere los diez últimos libros que han leído como grupo, o alternativamente puede adjuntar una fotocopia de la lista de los libros que se han leído desde el comienzo del grupo hasta ahora.

21. Nombre un libro que haya dado pie a una buena discusión y explique a qué se debe tan buen resultado.

22. Nombre un libro que haya dado pie a una discusión pobre y explique el por qué.

23. ¿Logran la mayoría de los miembros del grupo terminar el libro antes de la reunión?

24. ¿Qué es de lo que más disfrutan al pertenecer a un grupo de lectura?

25. ¿Ha cambiado el grupo desde sus comienzos? Si es así, ¿de qué manera?

MUCHAS GRACIAS POR COMPLETAR ESTE CUESTIONARIO.

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