

An Analysis of Female Characters Depicting a Blend of Feminism and Traditionalism in Selected Works by Isabel Allende

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Latin American author Isabel Allende has earned international acclaim through works depicting a unique style of blending the magical with the real. She incorporates aspects of feminism and traditionalism in her stories which reflect personal viewpoints on political and social issues, and she challenges the reader to evaluate these issues through the perspective of culture. Literary critics have voiced opposing opinions on Allende's feminist stance in her writings. According to a source cited by Isabel Dulfano in her Ph.D. dissertation titled *Feminist Strategies in the Work of Isabel Allende*, some critics say Allende's works represent a liberated feminist perspective, while others label her as a proponent of a tradition that upholds the masculine sexist paradigm (15-16). In reading a majority of Allende's works, most in English and some in Spanish, I was able to see both views within the spectrum of pronounced opinion, depending on how one defines feminism and its mix with traditionalism and culture. Equally significant, if not more so, is Allende's own perspective on feminism

and how her beliefs and background have influenced the creation of her characters and stories. To compare some of the differing opinions of Allende's writings, one must establish a base of information from which to draw meaning. This base will be provided by defining characteristics of feminism and traditionalism that will lend credence to opposing critical views by exploring Allende's background and viewpoints, and by critiquing several characters found in Allende's collection of short stories, *Cuentos de Eva Luna (Stories of Eva Luna)*, and in two of her novels, *Eva Luna* and *The Infinite Plan*.

Because Hispanic and North American cultures are featured in these particular works, it will be advantageous to examine first the dictionary definitions for *feminism* and *traditionalism* in both languages. *Webster's Dictionary* defines *feminism* in English as: "the doctrine advocating social and political rights of women equal to those of men; an organized movement for the attainment of such rights for women." *Feminismo* in the Real Academia Española edition of the *Diccionario de la Lengua Española*, which represents the Spanish language spoken in both Spain

and Latin America, is defined as "doctrina social favorable a la mujer, a quien concede capacidad y derechos reservados antes a los hombres (social doctrine favorable to woman, to whom is ascribed ability and rights previously reserved for men); movimiento que exige para las mujeres iguales derechos que para los hombres (a movement that demands equal rights for women as for men)." The wording differs slightly, but both spheres concur the advocacy of equal rights for women as a core definition.

Traditionalism is defined in *Webster's Dictionary* as "adherence to tradition as authority, esp. in matters of religion; a system of philosophy according to which all knowledge of religious truth is derived from divine revelation and received by traditional instruction." In Spanish, it is defined as the "Doctrina filosófica que pone el origen de las ideas en la revelación y sucesivamente en la enseñanza que el hombre recibe de la sociedad (Philosophical doctrine that the origination of ideas is in revelation and successively in the teachings that man receives from society); sistema político que consiste en mantener o restablecer las instituciones antiguas en el régimen de la nación y en la organización social (Political system that consists in maintaining or reestablishing old institutions in the regimen of the nation and the social organization)." Concurrence does not seem as clear between these two sets of definitions, especially if one considers the differences of traditional religion and political situation for each culture.

By defining feminism and traditionalism as recorded in both cultures, it is possible to see where conflict arises when the terms are discussed together. Feminism and traditionalism appear to be in opposition since feminism can be viewed as a changing force against tradition. The feminist movement in the United States has challenged traditional beliefs and male domination in social and political issues. Yet feminists have had differing views and goals from the outset of the movement, mainly because feminism is not simply a gender issue, but a conglomeration of issues that contest "cultural assumptions about gender, family, sexuality, education, religion, and so on" (Kahn xv).

In tracing the movement in the United States, for example, we find evidence that feminism evolved through phases or waves. In an essay focusing on third-world feminism in the U.S., Chela Sandoval reviews this evolution in these sequential phases: "liberal feminism" that demonstrated women as fully human as men; a second "feminist" phase that dramatized wronged womanhood and focused on illuminating differences between women and men; a third phase in which "women seek to uncover the unique expression of the essence of 'woman' which lies underneath the multiplicity of her experiences"; and a fourth phase characterized as "socialist feminism" in which differences among women were debated, especially focusing on race and class (7-8). According to Karen Kahn's introduction to *Front Line Feminism, 1975-1995*, the media had "characterized feminism as 'white and middle-class,'" which downplayed the many feminist movements initiated by "women of color in the United States, among poor and working-class women, and among Third World women throughout the world" (xv). Kahn further states, "There has never been a single voice, a single vision; just millions of women changing their lives and the world around them" (xv-xvi).

Because of the many voices and visions within the movement, it is difficult to lump all feminists together under one defining term. Background, culture, religion, sexual preference, and political affiliation are just several of the many influences that may define one woman as a radical

feminist, another as a conservative feminist, and still another as a "femi-nazi." These and other terms are bantered about in casual conversation, but many times only the individual speaking has a clear meaning of what is being stated. In my own experience, I have known women to be labeled feminists simply because they are educated, or because they believe abortion is a woman's right, or because they vote the Democratic ticket. Yet feminists can include uneducated women, pro-life proponents, and Republican voters as well.

Differing views prevail at the international level also, and since we are concerned with the Latin American perspective in particular, some questions to consider are: How do Latin American women define feminism? Is the feminist movement in Latin America as widespread and active as it is in the United States? Have cultural factors in Latin America hindered or escalated the feminist movement?

Although a Latin American perspective of feminism can be found within the United States as well as below the border, the fact that Latin America is comprised of many countries with varied historical and political backgrounds suggests differences in definition. In the Chicana feminist homepage *Making Face, Making Soul...*, Chicana feminism is defined as "a critical framework with which to look at inequalities along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality as they effect women of Mexican descent in the United States" (Basics). But to locate a pure definition of the term in Latin American is not as easy. During a visit to Peru in 1983, U.S. Feminist Charlotte Bunch noted that the women's movement in Latin America reminded her of the energy she witnessed in the United States movement in the early days of women's liberation. She writes:

Women's groups all over the world, but especially in the Third World, are taking up issues ranging from housing, nutrition, and poverty to militarism, sexual and reproductive freedom, and violence against women. We face these issues in the United States, too, of course, but their forms vary depending on the culture and where women feel the most intense oppression at any moment. (Kahn 456)

She also notes in her article that "close attention to the perspectives and energy of women outside our own class, race, and culture helps us see more possibilities rather than fewer, to see what feminism can mean as we all grow and evolve a definition that goes beyond any particular cultural boundaries" (Kahn 454).

Feminism is not new to Latin America, and Allende is proof of that. Allende was a promoter of the feminist movement in Chile, and through autobiographical excerpts in her non-fiction book, *Paula*, we can trace some of the historical setting in which the movement began. Allende begins by revealing the myth of patriarchy in Chile as a phenomena probably perpetrated by some foreigner who noticed that Chilean women were stronger and more organized than the majority of the men and somehow concluded that women were in command:

[...] from years of being repeated, the fallacy became dogma. If women have influence, it is only—and then only sometimes—within their home. Men control all the political and economic power, the culture and customs; they proclaim the laws and apply them as they wish, and when social pressures and the legal apparatus are not sufficient to subdue the most rebellious women,

the Church steps in with its incontestable patriarchal seal. (*Paula* 139-40)

In 1967, the first feminist publication, in which Delia Vergara allotted a portion of the magazine to her feminist ideals, appeared in Chile. "From the first issue, the magazine provoked heated polemics: the young welcomed it enthusiastically, while the most conservative segments of society rose up in defense of the morality, country, and tradition that surely would be endangered by equality between the sexes," Allende writes (*Paula* 141). Allende was offered a feature page in the magazine, and her popularity rose after publishing an anonymous interview with a woman who related her indulgence in infidelity through a perfectly organized set-up unbeknownst to her husband. The article horrified the religious and political right activists and generated a host of angry letters denouncing its content, but confessional letters from other women alluding to similar escapades poured in to the magazine, intimating that women were seeking pleasure outside of the norms dictated to them by society (*Paula* 143-44).

Journalism and subsequent television work were escapes for Allende. Despite "the prudish and moralistic atmosphere, the small-town mentality, and the rigidity of Chilean social norms at that time were overpowering" she worked long hours that included carrying out her prescribed role as mother, wife, and housekeeper. "My feminism did not include sharing household duties" (*Paula* 145-46).

When Salvador Allende Gossens, Isabel's uncle, was nominated as a presidential candidate for Chile by a coalition of Marxists, Socialists, Communists, et al., in September 1970, she was still busy writing articles for the feminist magazine (*Paula* 163). Some time after Allende Gossens became the first Marxist in history to be voted into presidential power by democratic vote, the magazine's editor sent Isabel to interview her uncle about his views on Christmas. In an opportune moment during one of his rare visits to her parents' home, Isabel attempted to carry out the interview, but to her initial question about the holiday he replied, "Don't ask me bullshit like that, Isabel." Allende describes the moment as the end of her "career as a political correspondent," so "I continued to knock out homemade horoscopes, articles on interior decoration, gardens, and raising children, interviews with the odd and bizarre, the lovelorn column, and pieces on culture, art, and travel" (*Paula* 172).

Through her own words, it appears that Allende did not write political pieces during her uncle's presidency, and in a 1997 interview with Claudia Dreifus, Allende even admits to being a "lousy journalist." Chilean poet Pablo Neruda advised her to become a novelist, not a journalist. "He felt that [Allende] made everything up and that these were good skills in fiction, but not for a reporter" (Dreifus 332).

Only three short years after Allende Gossens' election, his presidency and life ended in a coup formed by the navy, army, air corps, and the Chilean police. It marked the beginning of terror for the Chilean population, a time of censorship, disappearances, murder, torture, and persecution at the hands of dictator Augusto Pinochet. The swift change in power and the association of family ties to the overthrown government combined to make the situation dangerous for Allende, especially in her line of work. Feminism was considered as subversive to tradition as Marxism, and Allende found frustration in the censorship of her work. She and her family endured under the dictatorship in Chile for two years, but as the Allende name drew threat

of harm from the regime, they finally left for Caracas, Venezuela, in 1975 when the danger became too great (*Paula* 201).

Though she did not take the opportunity to become politically visible then, she tells Dreifus that, had she remained in Chile, she hoped she could have been a journalist like other women journalists who had taken the risk to play a role in ending Pinochet's power, "When I look back, I think, 'If I had stayed, I wish I would have been like them, brave and courageous, and in the first lines defying the government, denouncing torture, defying the censorship,' but I was unable to do it. I was so afraid, that I left" (Dreifus 332).

In exile, Allende was unable to find work as a journalist or any other position in her field. Her frustration carried on for nearly seven years after leaving Chile when, finally, Allende began a letter to her ill grandfather that mushroomed into a book-length manuscript. The fictionalized account of her family history became her debut novel, *La casa de los espíritus* (*The House of Spirits*). Following the publication of the novel, she became more political and outspoken in her next endeavor. John Rodden notes in an interview with Allende for *The Kenyon Review* that her first two novels, *The House of Spirits* and *Of Love and Shadows*, "express her critical views of patriarchal tyranny and the right-wing Pinochet dictatorship" (113).

In *Of Love and Shadows*, Allende made her political stance visible by using incidents during the Pinochet regime as the political background of the novel. Allende explains in *Paula*:

The story of the deaths at Lonquén had lain in my heart since 1978; I had kept every press clipping that came into my hands without knowing exactly why, since at that time I had no inkling that my steps were leading toward literature. So by 1983, I had at my disposal a thick folder of information, and knew where to find other facts; my job consisted of weaving those threads into a single cord. (282)

According to John Rodden, Allende was also active in an effort to oust Pinochet by backing a broad left-center coalition to elect Patricio Aylwin for the presidency in December, 1989 (114).

Her Chilean experience can be seen as a catalyst to expanding her views of feminism. "It was not until I was twenty-six or seven years old that I got in touch with feminism," Allende said in an interview with Michelle García for *Pacifica Network News*. "We created the first organized feminist movement in Chile. This has determined my life. Women's issues have been extremely important to me" (García).

Having established Allende as a feminist within the scope of previously discussed definitions and the historical content provided, we can explore the feminist views of Allende and how they can be perceived in relationship to some of her created characters. Allende's works arouse conflicts of opinion among her critics. As already noted, Doris Meyer feels Allende represents a liberated feminist perspective, while Gabriela Mora labels her a proponent of the masculine sexist paradigm (Dulfano 15-16). Responses to Allende's writing vary between this spectrum. As stated in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, "Much critical analysis of Allende's work has been devoted to her feminist perspective and her depiction of the patriarchal society of Latin America has been applauded, though some critics charge that her portrayals of Latin males are

frequently stereotypically macho and that she at times resorts to other cliché's about Hispanics" (Introduction 2).

Dulfano's opinion is that Allende is clearly a feminist but that "her position is one of compromise, seeking harmony" (23), and she backs this statement with a quote from *Contemporary Authors*: "We should keep in mind that Allende posits her feminism as one more aligned with a South American understanding of the term, and that it will involve a change in society – a society shared by both men and women – not in a war but in a joint struggle" (Dulfano 28).

Growing up in the *machismo* Latin American culture caused Allende to question everything—tradition, myths, culture, family, laws, religion, and science—because they were all manipulated by men. In an interview with Norma Valle for *Fempress*, Allende says it took her nearly four decades to accept herself because before that acceptance, she wanted to be a man and to be able to have some control in her society:

No es fácil ser mujer en ninguna circunstancia, pero cuando se vive en una sociedad machista, como lo son casi todas en América Latina, es como tratar de correr en muletas [...]" (It isn't easy to be a woman in any circumstance, but when one lives in a macho society, such as in all of Latin America, it is like trying to run with crutches [...]). (Valle)

Having lived in the margins of society as one who has rebelled and struggled against the status quo, Allende identifies with many of her "marginal" female characters through her writings: "Marginals are people who stand unsheltered by the system, who somehow defy authority, defy the stereotypes. These people can be prostitutes, poor people, crazy people, guerrillas, homosexuals... And I'm always fascinated by those characters because in a way I think I've always defied authority too" (qtd. in Rodden 118).

Belisa Crepusculario fits the description of a marginal character as the poverty-stricken protagonist in "Two Words" ("Dos palabras"), a short story found in *The Stories of Eva Luna*. Belisa was born into poverty and an inhospitable environment, spending the first twelve years of her life fending for food and survival. A devastating drought forces the survivors from the area, and after a grueling trek to a coastal town, Belisa faces a new dilemma. For a poor woman in Latin American, the choices for making a living were relegated to three: she can marry, become a servant, or become a prostitute. But because a chance wind sends a newspaper page to her feet, the illiterate Belisa discovers that the scratching on the paper is writing. In light of this amazing discovery, she renounces society's dictates and instead pays a priest to teach her to read and write. Armed with a new skill, she memorizes the dictionary from beginning to end and begins to make a living selling words and stories from town to town. She delivers paid-for messages, writes love letters or insults, and for each 50 *centavos* spent for a service, the customer receives a secret word to be used only by that individual for comfort and happiness. If that were the end of the story, Belisa's success could be considered a feminist triumph in that she overcame the expectations of society to gain an education and to begin a business. But the story is also about



the power Belisa finds through her education – the power of using words that can change society. In this case, it is the power of two words.

Belisa is abducted from her place of business by a gang of men supporting a war-hardened Colonel in civil war to take control of the country. The Colonel decides that he does not want to take the country forcefully, but would rather win presidential power by popular vote. When Belisa is brought before him, he orders her to give him words with power to sway the people. She carefully executes a sincere speech that moves even his toughened men to awe. When the Colonel insists on paying for the work, the price for the job comes to one peso, entitling the Colonel to two secret words. Though the Colonel does not really want the two words, Belisa insists he must receive them; when she leans over him to whisper the words into his ear, the Colonel drinks in her smell, her closeness, even her breath, as the two words sink into his mind. Afterwards, she is taken back to the market place.

At this point, it may seem that Belisa is a victim of circumstances, forced to comply with a man's agenda. But the power of her two words, words which the reader can only imagine, are working on the Colonel. Between delivering the powerful speech and successfully winning the people's confidence, he spends every free moment repeating the two words to himself; he is obsessed with the words and the memory they invoke of Belisa. His obsession and distraction eventually become so great that his right-hand man seeks out Belisa again, this time bringing her to the Colonel to take back the words and their spell.

Their meeting takes an almost reversed position, this time with Belisa wielding the power and the Colonel in a victimized role. This could have been the time when Belisa might have taken advantage of the situation to gain something for herself (money, perhaps position). Instead, she is only seeking an equal standing. As she and the Colonel face each other, they size each other up; this time, instead of a cold, hardened look, his face softens. His men witness the effect of the words and of Belisa on his demeanor, and they realize the Colonel has been changed. Belisa then goes to the Colonel and takes his hand in hers. That final action supports the possibility of equality between the two characters; they reach an equal status because he has lowered his machismo façade and because she has met him with respect instead of a smug, conquering attitude.

This is one example of how Allende's female characters work within the macho system without making the man a victim, allowing the woman to rise to equal standing. This confirms Dulfano's opinion of Allende's feminist position as "one of compromise, seeking harmony" (23). Belisa's rise to equality could also be a story supporting what some critics call Allende's liberated feminist perspective (Dulfano 15-16). Yet Allende does not always give her female characters an equal footing with men; instead, she frequently portrays how women can overcome some of the circumstances they face within the Latin American culture, particularly in those circumstances manipulated by the stereotypical male.

Though the Colonel in "Dos palabras" is introduced in a stereotypical role, he does soften toward the non-traditional female protagonist in the end. Allende depicts another female character exhibiting influence on the male character in "The Judge's Wife." In this story, the stereotypical ideal for both sexes weakens, while it is also possible to agree with the critical opinion that states

Allende supports a masculine sexual paradigm (Dulfano 15-16).

The female protagonist in this story, like Belisa, has few options in choosing a career. But Casilda doesn't have an opportunity to choose for herself. Her family thrusts her into an arranged marriage with an old man who is a judge in a harsh land of heat, bandits, and social restrictions. Obeying her husband, having his children, attending church, and keeping the home in order, Casilda is the stereotypical Latin American wife. In the first line of the story, we learn of a marginal character, the macho *bandido* Nicolás Vidal. Nicolas began his life with a prophecy that a woman will cost him his life. For this reason, he never allows himself to open his emotions to women and uses them only for gratification.

When Nicolas sees Casilda for the first time, the young, delicate virgin is marrying Judge Hidalgo who reigns over his town with a firmness backed by a militia group or *guardia*. He notices her physical weakness and supposes she will not live through the heat and hardships to come, but he has no emotion toward her beyond that thought. Yet, even though Casilda appears to be weak, her dedication to role as a wife and eventually as a mother has a calming effect on her husband's harshness, much to the relief of the townsfolk. However, the Judge is still obsessed with capturing Nicolás, and he decides to set a trap using the bandit's mother as bait. He has the old woman caged in the town square, hoping that Nicolás will attempt to rescue her. Nicolas, however, waits to see if the judge really means business, and the trap becomes a test to see who is more macho, who will hold out longer. For three days the woman is left in the heat of the town square with only a jug of water; when the water runs out, her cries of anguish fill the town square. The townspeople, still fearful of the judge, appeal to Casilda. Until this moment, Casilda has focused only on her own family and life. Now, she decides to defy her husband's orders for the first time, and, with her children in tow, she carries food and water to Nicolás' mother.

Casilda breaks out of her subservient role to defy her husband's orders, moving away from the stereotype assigned her. Tony Spanos suggests that Casilda's participation stems from a new behavior to provide a model of conduct: "Casilda appears to participate willingly in this humanitarian and civic act not out of love for her husband or for ulterior motives but as a result of serious deliberation and moral conviction" (168). Her new actions, for whatever reasons, influence her husband's responses. When the guards prevent Casilda and the children from approaching the cage, the cries of his own children drag the judge from his office. He is so humbled by his wife's example that he releases the woman.

In continuing with "The Judge's Wife," we must look at the remainder of this story through the filter of criticism that Allende supports a male sexist paradigm, in particular, Allende's treatment of rape. Nicolas, gloating in his belief that he has won the contest, is quickly moved to rage when he discovers that his mother hangs herself, shamed that her own son did not attempt to rescue her. Nicolás swears revenge against the Judge, so the Judge drives Casilda and the children to meet the militia for protection. En route, the Judge dies of a heart attack and the car is wrecked. Casilda and her children are left as open targets for Nicolas and his mob of approaching bandits, so she hides her children in a cave and sits down in the middle of the road to meet them, determined to allow them all to rape her to buy time for the militia to arrive. But Nicolas shows up alone, and she is faced with the dilemma of distracting him long enough for

the militia to close in.

In a momentous accounting of each other, they decide each faces a formidable adversary. They realize the stakes are their lives, and as Nicolás takes her, the judge's wife uses every sexual fancy and device to keep him occupied. Then the unexpected happens. Nicolás is caught off guard by her charms and opens himself up to the intimacy of the moment, and Casilda, who had been married to a rusty old man, begins to enjoy what is supposed to be rape. The twist from rape to rapture arouses lover-like emotions and later, as they rest satisfied in each other's arms, she begs him to flee. However, he chooses to stay and face the firing squad rather than give up this moment of happiness. The prophecy of Nicolas is fulfilled—a woman costs him his life.

The rape to rapture scene could easily be misconstrued as supporting a male sexist paradigm. Rape is a major feminist concern, especially as it pertains to myths about rape. According to Patricia Hart's essay in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, a common and damaging societal misconception about rape is that women actually *want* to be raped. She also briefly discusses the rationalization for rape in which the rapist reasons that the woman actually offered consent (32). It would seem on the surface that Allende is supporting the notion of rape with consent. But Hart defends Allende's use of the rape/love scene as a means to "warp conventional expectations and cause us to view these important feminist issues in a new light" (38):

[...] the "magical" transformation of yet another fairy tale (the male sexual fantasy of rape as a means of overcoming the hang-ups of uptight females in order to give them "what they really want") is made clear by the price the rapist pays in the end for his actions—death. The story ends not with Vidal reformed, transformed into a charming prince, and married to Casilda, but with the bandit facing a firing squad. In reality, the story, which appears to cater to a male fantasy, surprises us at the end by satisfying two deep and all-but-impossible female fantasies with regard to rapists: first, that they should feel remorse, concern, or other emotions for their victims, and second, that their punishment should be as severe as anything the society permits. In this case, by administering the death penalty to her sex offender, Allende casts great doubt on whether the story should be read at face value. (Hart 35)

Casilda could be considered a heroine in the humanitarian sense in that she does take a stand for Nicolás' mother and heroic because of her decision to protect her children at all costs. Her heroism comes into question because of her enjoyment of the sexual encounter with Nicolás and raises some other questions as well. Is she a victim of rape, or is she a woman discovering sexual pleasure and freedom that were denied her in a patriarchal society? Does Casilda continue to grow as an independent woman? Tony Spanos raises another question:

Isabel Allende has made a formidable effort to juxtapose myths and century-old stereotypes with new models of moral and ethical conduct. In the end the reader is left with this puzzling question: does Casilda fall into the perpetual traps of tradition, sex, and injustice or are her moral struggles sufficient to elevate her to the stature of a true heroine? (171)

Allende portrays other "heroic" female characters rising above their situations, and it is sometimes difficult to determine whether the characters are feminists at the outset or if they become so because of the need to survive in a male-dominated society. In fact, do her female

protagonists become feminists at all? We do not know what life courses are taken by Belisa and Casilda after breaking from their traditional roles, but we do get a glimpse of one woman's lifestyle change in "The Gold of Tomás Vargas."

The heroine in this story is Antonia Sierra, wife of the "quarreling, carousing, and womanizing" Tomás Vargas, who "took great pride in being the most macho macho in the region..." (Allende, *Stories of Eva Luna* 72). Antonia's background is one of suffering and bearing child after child, and despite the rumors that Tomás is hoarding a fortune in hidden gold, he does not contribute to the financial needs of the family. Adding to Antonia's burdens, her husband's young pregnant mistress ends up moving into the home. To the townsfolk, his actions are perfectly acceptable: "In Agua Santa they could tolerate a man who mistreated his family, a man who was lazy and a troublemaker, who never paid back money he borrowed, but gambling debts were sacred" (*Stories of Eva Luna* 80).

In a social setting of this nature, it appears that both Antonia and the mistress are powerless to change their situations without breaking through the traditional expectations. Antonia begins to rise above the situation by first showing compassion for the pregnant mistress, who in her pronounced state is ignored by Tomás and has fallen ill. The female bond continues after the birth, and when Tomás decides he wants to sleep with his mistress against her will, Antonia stands up to him for the first time "to keep the old vulture from getting his way. Her husband made a move to whip off his belt to give her the usual thrashing, but before he could complete the gesture, she started toward him with such ferocity that he stepped back in surprise. With that hesitation, he was lost, because she knew then who was the stronger" (*Stories of Eva Luna* 79).

The stereotype of Tomás is undermined at this point. He is portrayed as losing his macho bearing in the following passages wherein he gambles and loses all. He is last seen going to collect his fortune to pay his gambling debt, but soon after his mutilated body is found in the ravine where his gold was supposedly buried. The gold is never found, but Antonia Sierra, the mistress, and their children begin to prosper financially soon after the burial of Antonia's husband. The two women begin a business and enjoy upgrading their lifestyles, leaving the reader with the idea that the women get away with murder and the gold, and that they break out of traditional roles to attain a feminist ideal of being independent of male domination.

Allende considers *The Stories of Eva Luna* and *Eva Luna* to be feminist works in which she portrays her own feminist ideal:

[...] en ambos plasma su opinión sobre el feminismo que para ella es "una revolución trascendental capaz de impulsar a la humanidad a un estado de evolución superior." ([...] in both [books] she molds her opinion about feminism that for her is "a transcendental revolution capable of propelling humanity to state of superior evolution"). (Valle)

It may be easier to view Eva Luna, the protagonist and narrator of *Eva Luna*, as more feminist than the characters she weaves for Rolf Carlé in the *Stories of Eva Luna*. Born illegitimate to a mother of unknown origins and an Indian father, Eva is orphaned at an early age and left to the care of her *madrina*, a woman who eventually rents her out as a servant. Eva's mother had left her with a legacy of stories that transformed her life as a child and carried her through trials as an

adult:

She placed at my feet the treasures of the Orient, the moon, and beyond. She reduced me to the size of an ant so I could experience the universe from that smallness; she gave me wings to see it from the heavens; she gave me the tail of a fish so I would know the depths of the sea [...] She sowed in my mind the idea that reality is not only what we see on the surface; it has a magical dimension as well and, if we so desire, it is legitimate to enhance it and color it to make our journey through life less trying. (Allende, *Eva Luna* 22)

Eva's life journey is a continuum of phases ranging from adopted daughter, to servanthood, to educated young woman, to a scriptwriter of *telenovelas* (soap operas), all of which takes place through what Susan Frenk calls "a series of relationships with seductive patriarchal masculinities" (75). Of the three men who are significant in her life, namely father figure and protector Riad Halabí, the macho guerrilla hero Huberto Naranjo, and Austrian-born photographer Rolf Carlé, Eva ends up choosing the most non-stereotypical male:

Despite their different histories Eva and Rolf are able to construct a common, hybrid, narrative together [...] Their relationship rejects configurations of unequal complementarity, absolute incommunication, or domination/submission. Instead it proposes an equality that works not through the abolition of difference [...] but through respect for what Jacques Derrida terms 'the trace of the other.' (Frenk 75)

Yet it is Eva's growth as a writer that is at the heart of her feminist role. María Roof sees Eva as a character like Irene Baltran in *Of Love and Shadows*. Both characters begin their careers adhering to traditional subjects and forms, "but who grow to 'deterritorialize' women by appropriating the non-female/non-feminine public spaces of politics and legalities as targets of their professional work" (409). Roof claims that these characters become models to literate Third World audiences "as they break with constrictions which relegate 'decent' women to private spaces and as they transgress the spatial limits imposed on upper- and middle-class women" (409).

Eva's choices enable her to transcend the ascribed role of women in a patriarchal society and to take a behind-the-scene part in Huberto's guerrilla activity. In her role as a writer, she is able to weave politically-censored material into her popular *telenovelas* in hopes of publicizing political truths, though the series involving a guerrilla prison rescue probably was never aired due to political changes at the end of the novel (Allende, *Eva Luna* 301).

The melding of Eva's feminism and political activity could be a reflection of Allende's own growth as a writer and of her views about the relationship between feminist and political goals. According to Dulfano, Allende does not see the goals as separate: "Allende draws no delineation between political versus feminist goals," she writes. "Feminism is not a local nor isolated phenomena and as such, it is intimately tied to political and social change" (24).

That process of change may be continuing in Latin America, but as a newcomer resident to the United States through her marriage to Californian William Gordon, Allende readily noted the obvious difference between Latin American and North American achievements for women. In

an interview with *Mother Jones Interactive Mojo Wire*, Allende is asked: "Now that you've married an American and you live here, what do you find surprising about the United States?" Allende answers:

I realize that there is much more to it than I ever thought. It is a very complex society—multiracial, multicultural, with many languages. [...] There is also all this spiritual quest, mainly among women. You can afford that because that's something you can do when you have passed the stages of survival. In other cultures, women are at the stage of feeding their children.

Allende takes on the multiracial and multicultural aspects of the United States in her novel, *The Infinite Plan*. Though this time Allende chooses Gregory Reeves as the white male protagonist, his life is intertwined throughout with childhood friend Carmen Morales. Their early lives depict life in a Los Angeles *barrio* (neighborhood). Gregory faces the brunt of reverse-prejudice as a white male living in a Hispanic community, while Carmen must adhere to a strict code set by her patriarchal father who believes that a woman should be silent and in the home, and he stood by the notion that his daughters must "learn domestic skills, help their mother, and guard their virginity until the day they were married – the only ambition for a decent girl" (73). Carmen dreams of a life filled with adventure, not marriage, "but she lacked the courage to make the break and leave home" (136).

With this background, it is easy to understand Carmen's dilemma when she learns she is pregnant by her American lover who refuses to marry her. She struggles between her newfound rebellion and her predicament:

This was her hour of truth, and she must face it alone; it was one thing to talk a big game, making vaguely feminist statements, but something quite different to be an unmarried mother in her corner of the world. She knew that her family would never speak to her again; they would throw her out of the house, out of her clan, even out of the *barrio*. (139)

Carmen ends up having a botched abortion that nearly takes her life. Because the abortion makes her previous actions obvious, her father disowns her and after healing, she leaves the *barrio*. The novel traverses through the Vietnam War and social changes of the era that included less moral restrictions when "feminists were advocating women's right to an abortion, and hippies were coupling in public parks in full view of anyone who wanted to watch" (212). The changes of society probably brought about an acceptance that her father would not have had in his own land, but later, Carmen and her father are reconciled.

This act of reconciliation between the stereotypical male and the woman coming into her own fits with Allende's desire to see harmony between men and women – a harmony that comes about by the softening of male chauvinism and the power of love. "Clearly the inscription of a feminist perspective can not revolve exclusively around women and relies on a change in man as well," states Dulfano. "In this book [*The Infinite Plan*], through the course of these stories [told by Eva Luna], man is gradually brought around to see reality another way" (243).

This gradual change in men, greatly influenced by Allende's female characters, can be seen in most of her works:

[...] Allende blatantly chooses to write about the subjective side of humans, by exploring their intangible feelings and emotions. Rather unabashedly, she postulates love as a possible solution to the conflict in a world misguided by the wrong spirits – the shadows. Her literature insists on the creation of an environment of unity, fluidity, and continuity, where evil can be destroyed by the love and compassion of good souls." (Dulfano 22)

By choosing a positive and hopeful approach in her works, Allende has alluded to some of her views on feminism and its influence on literature. Dulfano believes Allende's feminism "speaks to the amalgamation of ideas, the reevaluation of givens and the inscription of strong, previously silenced, feminine voices" (252). As Allende became consciously aware of the lack of feminine voices in writing only some time after reading the works of other Magic Realists, she was able to see the lack of the feminine voice: "The feminine characters were stereotypes—the mother, the prostitute, the bride. I asked, 'Where were the real people here who are women?' " (Dreifus 330).

But just because Allende chooses to include the feminine voice in her works does not mean she advocates it as a separate designation in literature. In an interview by Barbara Mujica for *Américas* magazine, Allende offers a cautious opinion about some feminist theories that insist on labeling literature:

[...] when we talk about literature, we just suppose it's masculine and it's not qualified by an adjective. When women write, they call it "women's literature" as if it were a minor genre. I think we women have to be careful not to fall into that trap ourselves. (42)

With this statement in mind, it is doubtful that Allende would label her own works as purely feminist works, but she does believe that point of view, perspective, one's sex, age, place of birth, social class, and race "determine a biography, a world view and, therefore, a form of writing" (Mujica 42).

Her hopes for the future and for the approaching millennium could therefore encompass not only our interactions as human beings, but also how we view literature: "I see a more feminine world, a world where feminine values will be validated, the same as masculine values are. A more integrated world" ("Isabel," *Mother Jones*).

Her stated hopes and integrated ideals in her works give traditionalists, feminists, and literary critics the opportunity to express criticisms across the spectrum. But whatever opinions are stated about Allende's feminist or literary views, they do not prevent her works from being popular – they may even promote it:

Pese a las críticas que ha recibido, sus textos continúan siendo éxitos en ventas, tiene un público fiel que la sigue sin pausas y, si bien no es del gusto de los exigentes críticos literarios, no puede negarse que su trayectoria artística es importante, ha trascendido y está encumbrada entre los grandes escritores de Chile" ("Isabel," *Escritores.CL*). (In spite of the criticisms she has received, her texts continue being successful in sales, she has a faithful public that continues without pause and, even if she doesn't meet the likes and literary demands of critics, no one can deny that her artistry is important and has transcended and is distinguished among the greatest

writers of Chile.)

Alexander Coleman agrees that Allende has a solid standing among her fellow native writers as "the first woman to join what has heretofore been an exclusive male club of Latin American novelists. Not that she is the first contemporary female writer from Latin America . . . but she is the first woman to approach on the same scale as the others the tormented patriarchal world of traditional Hispanic society" (Introduction 2).

Though making no claim to fame, Allende has been made famous by her works that incorporate her views of politics and feminism. Included among other honors, in 1994 she was recognized as a literary icon in her homeland with the highest obtainable honor awarded in Chile: *la Orden al Mérito Gabriela Mistral* (the Gabriela Mistral Order of Merit) (Allende, *Diez Cuentos* xiv).

Through the few examples presented, one can see how Allende combines the sources of her heritage and experiences to make her stories come alive with history and fiction. The analysis of her work continues as some university professors now give their students the opportunity to observe how she mixes her feminist views in traditional settings and characters and perhaps how she sets the critics to writing. Whether she is seen as a feminist, traditionalist, novelist, playwright, journalist, or literary giant, when asked how she feels about her books being studied as literature in universities worldwide, she answers: "It makes me feel very insecure. I'm afraid that sooner or later, the professors will know that I'm just bluffing and that there are no symbols, no metaphors, no hidden meanings in my books. I'm just telling a simple story and that's it" (Dreifus 333-4).

Dulfano insists that Allende is more than just a simple storyteller. She states that Allende's work has helped to bring women's issues to the public and "brings life to the silenced traditional woman; she is neither radical nor militant, rather a product of a chauvinist cultural system, which has been in place for centuries" (206). Perhaps through her current and continuing works, Allende will help to make her desires come true – to see men and women working in harmony to build an equal society.

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Biographical Sketch

Kathryn L. Maus received a B.S.E. (*summa cum laude*) in Spanish at Henderson State University in Dec. 1999. After teaching high school Spanish for one semester, she plans to attend graduate school at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. As a student of Dr. Henry Pérez, she was awarded a SILO grant to research the works of Chilean author Isabel Allende, with Dr. Pérez mentoring the project.

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