

# The Power of Love: Rewriting the Romance in Isabel Allende's *The House of the Spirits* and *Eva Luna*

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## ABSTRACT

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*Despite its ongoing popularity with women readers, romantic fiction has traditionally been regarded as an instrument of women's oppression, largely due to its reinforcement and even glorification of sexual stereotypes and bourgeois values. Latin American writer Isabel Allende's novels *The House of the Spirits* and *Eva Luna* both contain a number of the elements and conventions of romantic fiction, including distinct similarities to the two acknowledged foundations of this genre: Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*.*

*However, *The House of the Spirits* and *Eva Luna* can also be read as rewritings of the genre of romantic fiction. In these two texts, Isabel Allende appropriates and then reworks certain conventions of romantic fiction in order to portray her notion of "fulfilling egalitarian relationships" between men and women. Nevertheless, despite these feminist revisions, Allende's rewritten romances do retain the "wish-fulfillment" element—or ideal—of romantic fiction, its depiction of women's fantasy of feminine values being appreciated and validated within heterosexual romantic relationships in the real world.*

## INTRODUCTION

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The heterosexual romance plot at the heart of two of Isabel Allende's most popular novels—*The House of the Spirits* (*HS*) (1982) and *Eva Luna* (*EL*) (1987)—is perhaps the principal reason for the commercial success of these works. Romance, however, has

traditionally been regarded as an instrument of women's oppression. Wendy Langford, in a discussion of feminist ideas on romantic love, declares that the ideology of romantic love teaches [woman] that her life can be meaningful and significant through devoting herself to finding and keeping a man (24). Langford also quotes Andrea Dworkin, for whom love is "[a] frenzied passion which compels a woman to submit to a diminishing life in chains" (24), and French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir, who contends that through the heterosexual romance, woman is defined as "Other" by man, as a passive object destined for a life revolving around everyday concerns; whereas man has defined himself as the "One," the active subject who is capable of a life oriented towards freedom. Instead of seeking her own freedom, though, woman comes to "desire her enslavement so ardently that it will seem to her the expression of her liberty" (de Beauvoir qtd. in Langford 23-4).

A close reading of the heterosexual romantic plots in *The House of the Spirits* and *Eva Luna*, however, reveals that although Allende appropriates significant conventions of romantic fiction and infuses them into her narratives, she simultaneously deconstructs these conventions and reworks them into narratives of what de Beauvoir posits as an alternative to heterosexual romantic love: "genuine" love, "founded on the mutual recognition of two liberties. The lovers would then experience themselves both as self and as other, [and] for the one and the other, love would be a revelation of self and enrichment of the world" (qtd. in Langford 26).

In her reading of *The House of the Spirits*, Sandra Boschetto observes that fairy tale symbolic and narrative patterns play a significant structural and thematic role in the text but that Allende has carefully selected her motifs for purposes of deconstruction: to break down gender norms (51). In this essay, using a feminist deconstructive reading of her two novels, I shall show that Allende makes similar use of romantic fiction: she appropriates its major conventions and transforms them in order to challenge and to subvert gender norms. I shall use the analyses of romantic fiction in Anne Cranny-Francis's *Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Fiction* (1990), Janet Batsleer et al.'s *Rewriting English: Cultural Politics of Gender and Class* (1985), and Mary M. Talbot's *Fictions at Work: Language and Social Practice in Fiction* (1995) as the principal theoretical underpinning of my analysis of how Isabel Allende rewrites the romance in her novels *The House of the Spirits* and *Eva Luna*.

THE HOUSE OF THE SPIRITS

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One of the two novels which, according to Anne Cranny-Francis, seems to be the foundations of virtually all contemporary romance is Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). In this text, the love of the protagonists, the gipsy Heathcliff and the bourgeois Cathy, is transgressive—it apparently exists outside social law and is non-ideological because it is not dependent on economic circumstances. This is also the reason it is not consummated in social terms—as marriage. The characterization of Cathy is likewise transgressive, violating conventional representations of women: she is portrayed as an independent, autonomous, self-willed female. Due to her refusal of a culturally constructed femininity, she is destroyed in the text: she dies in childbirth. “By this means, Emily Brontë signifies that love *without economic motive* cannot exist in a bourgeois society; it is a disruptive force which will inevitably be destroyed, or at least be denied any material reality” (Cranny-Francis 179-80).

There is a striking parallelism between the romantic plot of *Wuthering Heights* and the romantic plots involving Blanca Trueba and her daughter Alba in *The House of the Spirits*. Like Cathy, the upper-class Blanca and Alba both fall in love with men from a lower social class: Blanca's lover, Pedro, is a Socialist peasant leader and folk singer, and Alba's lover Miguel is a student revolutionary. Both women are punished for their transgressive romantic relationships: Blanca is disowned by her father, the patriarch Esteban Trueba, and is forced to work for a living, while Alba is imprisoned and tortured during the military takeover for refusing to reveal the whereabouts of Miguel. Their punishments, however, are not irrevocable: Blanca and Pedro are eventually allowed to “live out in exile [in Canada] the love [they] had postponed since childhood” (HS 393), and Alba is released from prison and, at the end of the novel, waits for Miguel, carrying a child that may either be “the daughter of so many rapes or perhaps of Miguel, but above all, my own daughter” (HS 432).

Through her depiction of these characters and their relationships, Allende challenges the bourgeois, patriarchal ideology inscribed into the romance: the notion that love stories are actually “economic stories displaced into love story terms” (Cranny-Francis 183) and that “the desire that these texts encode is not sexual, but economic; the desire for solid middle- or upper-class status, for money

and power” (186). She moreover subverts one of the defining characteristics of the romantic hero: that he be an upper-class male who, via marriage, liberates the heroine from the lower class to which she initially belongs. This situation is reversed in *The House of the Spirits*, since Blanca and Alba both belong to the upper class while their lovers come from the working class. Marriage is never alluded to by either Alba or Miguel, and Blanca herself refuses Pedro’s repeated marriage proposals, well aware that their love may not survive the demands of what is, after all, a construct of bourgeois patriarchal ideology:

[Blanca] knew that if she went with Pedro Tercero she would be banished from her social circle and from the position she had always had, and she also realized that she would never be accepted by Pedro Tercero’s friends or be able to adjust to the modest life of a working-class quarter. (HS 279)

. . . [She] preferred those furtive hotel rendezvous with her lover to the routine of everyday life, the weariness of marriage and the shared poverty at the end of every month . . . Perhaps she feared the grandiose love that had stood so many tests would not be able to withstand the most dreadful test of all: living together. (HS 311)

Allende thus reworks the conventions of romantic fiction by depicting two plots of romantic love that are transgressive, that exist outside ideology—that are loves without economic motive—and yet that survive.

In the modern romance, the hero is usually an established professional from a wealthy or, occasionally, aristocratic background (Cranny-Francis 181); he is also “ruggedly handsome, with an animal magnetism which is quite extraordinary . . . always a powerful person, he is generally someone who is used to being obeyed; a bully . . . both professionally and personally . . . [apparently] *the epitome of the patriarchal male* (Talbot 81, italics mine). Emily Brontë’s Heathcliff and Charlotte Brontë’s Rochester, the hero of her novel *Jane Eyre*, are generally regarded as the prototypes of the romantic hero. Allende provides an ironic twist to this archetype, however, in the character of Count Jean de Satigny, the French aristocrat who marries Blanca but whom she does not love and eventually abandons. Although he

possesses the affluence and the air of mystery surrounding the romantic hero, he is more of an eccentric, dandified version who “did not perspire the way other mortals did, smelled of English cologne . . . drew out the final syllables of words and swallowed his r’s . . . [and] polished his fingernails and put blue eyewash in his eyes” (*HS* 181-2). It is Esteban Trueba, the patriarch in the novel, who possesses the romantic hero’s overwhelming virility and professional power; ironically, though, his wife Clara, whom he loves desperately, remains indifferent to his power throughout the novel. The women characters’ rejection of the male characters who come closest to resembling the archetypal romantic hero is thus another reworking of romantic conventions.

Perhaps the most truly transgressive female character in the novel is Amanda, the sweetheart of Blanca’s brother Nicolas. Like the typical romantic heroine, she comes from a less socially elevated background than that of her lover; unlike this heroine, though, she is somewhat older and more sexually experienced than her lover, and, more significantly, she refuses to marry Nicolas in order to elevate her social position: “I don’t love you enough for that, Nicolas,” she tells him frankly (*HS* 233). Unfortunately, Amanda is a marginalized character in the text, often depicted as suffering—first from an unwanted pregnancy and an abortion, later from a drug overdose—and finally dying at the hands of the military. Only in her two later novels, *Eva Luna* and *Of Love and Shadows* (1984) does Allende elevate her relatively unconventional female characters to the role of heroine and permit them to survive.

One convention of romantic fiction which Allende retains and uses to great advantage is the depiction of female sexual desire. Anne Cranny-Francis states that even if romantic fiction does have the role of coercing readers into an acceptance of patriarchal ideology, “it nevertheless continues to challenge patriarchal assumptions by stating female sexual desire as a reality, reconstituting women as sexual beings” (187). Romantic fiction might then be read as part of the process of negotiating a new understanding of female social roles and of renegotiating female subjectivity (Cranny-Francis 187). Allende, however, deviates from the depiction of the romantic heroine as a woman who, throughout most of the novel, is engaged in a struggle for self-control, whose “mind and body seem to be perpetually in conflict; the basic premise seems to be that women suppress their instincts/true feelings and are thrown into a state of confusion and

consternation by a desirable man's attentions" (Talbot 82). Allende's heroines do not hesitate to express their sexual desire in physical terms; moreover, their desire is unlike that of the conventional romantic heroine, described by Batsleer et al. as "masochistic, passive, dependent, jealous" (100). On the contrary, Allende's heroines and their male partners are alternately active and passive, teacher and pupil, explorer and the explored: Blanca "inhaled [Pedro's] new scent, rubbed herself against his bristly skin, ran her hands over his lean, strong body" (HS 156), and "Alba invented irresistible techniques of seduction, and Miguel created new and marvelous ways of making love to her" (HS 330). Allende's lovers are partners, equals, in passion; their sexual relationships do not typify "sado-masochistic heterosexuality," in which pleasure is the result of masculine activity and feminine dependence and passivity (Batsleer 99).

The women in *The House of the Spirits*, however, are still more or less confined to domestic space—to the house referred to in the novel's title. In the genre of romantic fiction, the house signifies the boundary of masculine and feminine domains and values, of public and private spheres of life; home is where women are, and where the world, power, and work are absent (Batsleer 94-5). In fact, in traditional Latin American society itself, the subordination of the feminine is aggravated by the rigid confinement of women to private spaces. The terms *masculine=mobile (active)* and *feminine=immobile (passive)* were interchangeable with *masculine=public* and *feminine=private* primarily because women were traditionally limited to the home, the convent, or the brothel (Franco 507). Blanca is thus depicted as having no interest at all in politics, whereas Alba becomes involved in the resistance movement "*out of love for Miguel, and not for any ideological conviction*" (HS 319).

## EVA LUNA

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Aside from Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) is another foundation of contemporary romance, in Anne Cranny-Francis' opinion. This novel contains the typical romantic plot, the romance and marriage of Jane Eyre and her wealthy suitor, Edward Rochester (Cranny-Francis 178). Rochester is established as a powerful figure within the text: he is considerably older and wealthier than Jane and more experienced in

the ways of the world, and therefore his physical ugliness, which is virtually fetishised in the text, cannot detract from his power and consequent attractiveness. Cranny-Francis contends that Charlotte Brontë uses this fetishisation of Rochester's homely appearance "to show that male attractiveness is not a physical attribute, but a social (ideological) construction; a function of power, which is in turn a construct of the ideologies of class and race" (180).

The relationship of Jane and Rochester is intricately paralleled by that of Eva Luna, the novel's eponymous protagonist, and her first lover, the Turkish merchant Riad Halabi. Like Jane, Eva is plain-looking and penniless but intelligent and outspoken; she is employed by Riad to serve as a sort of lady-in-waiting to his Arab wife Zulema. The hero and heroine's master-servant relationship in *Jane Eyre* is expanded into a guardian-ward relationship in *Eva Luna*; as Eva herself articulates: "Riad Halabi provided me with some essential baggage for my travels through life. Two gifts were of special importance: writing, and proof of existence" (*EL* 158). By using his financial power to obtain a birth certificate for Eva—who admits that "I had no papers to prove my presence in this world . . . it was as if I had never been born" (*EL* 158)—and to arrange for her to learn how to read and write, Riad provides her with both an identity and the ability to communicate. Later, he also initiates her into the realm of sex (although it is Eva who leads him on), and is thereby transformed, in Eva's mind, from a father-figure to a lover.

Their relationship, however, does not result in marriage. Wishing to protect Eva from scandal, Riad urges her to leave and begin life anew elsewhere—a reversal, in effect, of the *Jane Eyre* plot, in which Jane leaves in order to avoid scandal although Rochester begs her to stay. Riad, like Rochester, is an older, financially stable man whose ugliness is also fetishised in the text (he has a harelip); but unlike Rochester, he does not assume a domineering, almost bullying manner towards the young heroine. He is consistently compassionate towards Eva, who describes their relationship thus: "We were united by laughter and play" (*EL* 153); and later, their first and only sexual encounter: "It was smiling and joyful . . . [we were] two uninhibited and playful friends" (*EL* 201). This depiction of romance as the offshoot of a comfortable, intimate friendship displaces the underlying sexual tension of the relationships depicted in conventional romantic fiction.

The incestuous undertones of Eva's relationship with a father-figure transformed into a lover are echoed in her next major relationship, this time with her childhood friend, Huberto Naranjo, who grows up to become a highly feared guerilla leader. Huberto is the brother-figure who finds employment for Eva, urges her to learn how to read and to find a decent job, and later on becomes her erratic lover. Huberto embodies the virility and the machismo of the patriarchal male: the typical romantic hero as well as the typical Latin American male. Eva initially speaks of him, and of her feelings for him, in explicitly romantic terms: "I felt a languid warmth in my knees, and my heart was pounding; a long-forgotten passion suddenly swept over me. I had thought I would love him forever" (*EL* 220); "He had come into my life in a mist of secrecy, bringing with him something heroic, something terrible" (*EL* 228). She alludes to "the tremendous magnetism that emanated from him, electrifying the air around him and attracting me like an insect to a bright light" (*EL* 232) and openly admits that "I was desperate, wild, possessed by a compulsion to enslave him, never to let him leave my side . . . I was almost out of my mind" (*EL* 230).

Although Eva and Huberto's relationship comes closest to paralleling that of the domineering male and the submissive female in conventional romantic fiction, it does not result in marriage but instead evolves into what Eva realizes is "the track where it should always have been. We were two best friends, affectionate and slightly incestuous brother and sister" (*EL* 286). Their relationship is hindered from further development primarily by the discrepancy between their political ideologies, especially with regard to their perceptions of the role of women in their society. An ingrained macho, Huberto firmly believes in the dichotomy of public = masculine and private = feminine space, and makes a distinction between women who are to be respected (the virgin, the wife/mother) and who are "easy" (the whore). "I respect you," he tells Eva, "You're not like the others" (*EL* 229-30), and because of this ideology, Eva deliberately refrains from telling him of her love affairs with other men, thereby sustaining his illusions. Eva is the only one among Allende's heroines who explicitly verbalizes Latin American women's protest against their society's double standard:

[Huberto] believed that because I had been born a girl I was at a disadvantage, I should accept my limitations and entrust



myself to others' care. Huberto had thought that way since he could think at all; it was not likely that the Revolution was going to change those attitudes. I realized that our problems were not related in any way to the fortunes of the guerillas; even if he achieved his dream, there would be no equality for me. For Naranjo, and others like him, "the people" seemed to be composed exclusively of men; we women should contribute to the struggle but were excluded from decision-making and power. His revolution would not change my fate in any fundamental way; under any circumstances, as long as I lived I would still have to make my own way. Perhaps it was at that moment I realized that mine is a war with no end in view; I might as well fight it cheerfully or I would spend my life waiting for some distant victory in order to be happy. (*EL* 233)

What makes *Eva Luna* particularly interesting is that it can be read as a sort of metatext: romantic fiction commenting on romantic fiction. Eva recognizes the predictable formula inherent in the conventional romantic novel:

[Riad] brought me romantic novels, all in the same vein: a secretary with fleshy lips, silken breasts, and trusting eyes meets an executive with muscles of bronze, temples of silver, and eyes of steel; she is always a virgin, even in the unusual instance of being a widow; he is authoritarian and superior to her in every way; there is a misunderstanding over jealousy or an inheritance, but everything works out and he takes her in his steely arms and she sighs trochaically, and both are transported with passion—but nothing gross or carnal. The culmination was always a single kiss that led to the ecstasy of the paradise of no return: matrimony. Nothing followed the kiss, only the words "The End," embellished with flowers or doves. (*EL* 152-3)

A born storyteller, Eva, like Allende herself, rewrites the romances she creates, seldom respecting the standard happy ending "Little bird, my abuela used to say, why don't people in your stories ever get married?" (*EL* 73); transferring characters from one story to another; adding and removing details; and thereby making her characters more and more complicated and her plots more and more rebellious (*EL* 153, 252). At the same time, *Eva Luna* is itself a romantic text written in an unconventional way. Eva, the first-person

narrator, alternately tells the story of her life and of that of her third and final (or so it is implied) lover, the Austrian immigrant and renowned photojournalist Rolf Carlé.

Rolf, like Pedro and Miguel in *The House of the Spirits*, is not the typical romantic hero: he is a strong, silent figure who recognizes the heroine as his intellectual, emotional, and sexual equal. It is only towards the latter part of the novel that Eva and Rolf meet, and both come gradually to the knowledge that they were probably destined for one another: “I understood then why from the first I thought I had known him before. Quite simply, it all came down to the elemental fact that I had found my mate, after so many weary years searching for him. It seemed that he felt the same, and may have reached the identical conclusion” (EL 306). As in the standard romance, the culmination of their story is the kiss: “He strode forward, and kissed me exactly as it happens in romantic novels” (EL 306). It is true that both *The House of the Spirits* and *Eva Luna* have the happy endings typical of romantic fiction, but in conventional romantic fiction, “sexuality is ambivalently gratified and displaced through the social codes of love-and-marriage, the dominant codes of romance” (Batsleer 102). In Allende’s romances, on the other hand, love and sexuality are celebrated not as mere means to a particular [economic] end, marriage, but simply for their very existence. Eva thereby ends her story with this celebration of “an exceptional love, a love I did not have to invent, only clothe in all its glory so that it could endure in memory” (EL 307).

## CONCLUSION

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Although Isabel Allende does retain certain conventions of romantic fiction—the heterosexuality of the lovers involved; the happy ending brought about by their union (though not necessarily matrimonial); and the depiction of female sexual desire—she also reworks other conventions of this genre in order to endow her female characters with more autonomy and to create a kind of love that does not encode bourgeois, patriarchal ideology, primarily by not requiring marriage for its culmination. Her heroines’ desire for the heroes does not mask a desire for economic security and social prestige, and her heroes are not domineering, patriarchal male figures. Her heroines are both aware of and comfortable with their sexuality, and *Eva Luna*

achieves autonomy and maturity not merely through her romantic relationships but also—and perhaps more so—through her vocation as a writer. Romance has been regarded as “a narrative of the female’s quest for a male partner who will make her “whole,” but who is himself already “whole”; a narrative in which the female self is thus seen as a “self-in-relation” to others, while the male self is seen as a self autonomous and independent” (Talbot 99). By creating strong, independent female characters who desire men but can apparently survive and grow even without them, Allende subverts this particular notion of the romance.

The relationships of the lovers in *The House of the Spirits* and *Eva Luna* perhaps represent what Anne Cranny-Francis terms “fulfilling egalitarian relationships: relationships between strong female characters who are not forced to accept either subjugation or a castrated partner as a result of their independence, and strong male characters whose power is not a function of their ability to subjugate others” (184). Cranny-Francis points out that this type of relationship usually appears in utopian and science fiction, in which non-realist conventions are used to displace the setting to another time and/or place with a social formation that is both non-patriarchal and non-bourgeois (184). Allende’s heroes and heroines, however, are allowed to live out their romances in the context of a patriarchal and bourgeois Latin American society.

Nevertheless, in her study of the reasons women read romances, Janice Radway posits that the romance is actually a “fantasy . . . of a ritual wish to be cared for, loved, and validated in a particular way.” In this romantic “fantasy,” the man is capable of the same attentive observation and intuitive “understanding” that women regularly accord to men (582). Gill Frith, in an essay on women’s writing, likewise maintains that romantic novels offer women a chance to *fantasise* alternatives—masculine tenderness, female power—to reality (172, italics mine).

Fantasy, as Rosemary Jackson defines it, “invert[s] elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar, and *apparently* new, absolutely ‘other’ and different” (8). The implication then is that a world in which masculine tenderness and understanding are freely expressed within heterosexual romantic relationships, is a world that can exist only in the realm of fantasy—a world that would be strange,

unfamiliar, absolutely different from our own. This may seem a rather harsh indictment of heterosexual romantic relationships in our world as we know it; and yet it is true that these relationships, even in our day and age, are not yet truly and totally free from the complications caused by sexual stereotyping and sexual inhibitions.

In a secular culture, however, the proper function of fantasy, as Jean Paul Sartre sees it, is to “transform this world” (qtd. in Jackson 17-8). By retaining the element of fantasy that underlies romantic fiction—the fantasy of women receiving the same tenderness and understanding that they bring to their relationships with men—Isabel Allende thereby uses her rewritten versions of the heterosexual romance plot to transform reality: to impart her vision of “a more integrated world” in which “feminine values will be validated, the same as masculine values are” (Allende, interview).

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