

Discussion Questions for *House of the Spirits*

1

The narrator is unnamed at the beginning of the novel, but soon turns out to be Alba. The second narrator is Esteban Trueba. Why do we need two narrators in this book? How does it illustrate the ongoing conflicts between conservatism and socialism? Imagine that one of the following characters narrates the book instead of Alba: Clara, Pedro Tercero García, Jaime. How would the story be different in terms of structure, tone, and plot? Make sure you justify your assertions with specific evidence about the character you choose.

2

Allende wrote this novel as a long love letter to her dying Grandfather in Chile, while she was living in exile, partly to dramatize her family history. Sons and daughters elaborately populate the "family saga" of "House of the Spirits." Explore the connection between mothers and daughters, and sons and fathers, in the novel. Why do you think these special bonds do not occur between mothers and sons, or between fathers and sons? Are there any exceptions to this tradition?

3

Pride, nationalism, socialism, women's rights, and, finally, human rights are a few of the themes in this book. Explore the issue of paternity and maternity in *The House of the Spirits*. What are the characters' attitudes toward paternity and maternity (motherhood and fatherhood) throughout the novel? Do they change or remain constant?

4

Describe the relationships in this novel between children and their parents. Do you side with any of these characters, or do you disagree with their actions? Make a case for whether maternity or paternity is more important in *The House of the Spirits*.

5

This novel has been called a masterpiece of "Magical Realism," which means it's a story filled with ghosts, supernatural events, psychic powers, and other strange happenings. Explain the significance of the supernatural world in the novel. Does it have significance to all the characters, or only to those who can communicate with it and who believe in its power? Could the family's story survive if all instances of the supernatural were removed? If so, how would it be different?

6

Consider the way in which love and suffering connect in *The House of the Spirits*. What message does Allende send by highlighting the ways in which they are inseparable? Use specific instances from the text to support your opinion.

7

Explore the role of silence in the novel. In your analysis, you may want to consider Clara's bouts of silence, Esteban Trueba's refusal to allow radios in his house, and instances in which characters keep silent in one another's interest or in order to save one another.

8

How does the novel portray sex? In your analysis, consider instances of rape, prostitution, passionate consensual lovemaking, infidelity, and consensual "loveless" lovemaking without passion.

9

Explore the significance of the main characters and one of the following minor characters and make a case for why his or her subplot is essential to the story: Transito Soto, Pancha García, Old Pedro García, Amanda.

10

In *The House of the Spirits*, romantic love is essential but often forbidden. Why do you think Allende creates a story where love is taboo? In your analysis, make sure to examine the relationships between Clara and Esteban, Blanca and Pedro Tercero García, and Alba and Miguel. Additionally, consider the question: what types of love are expressly allowed in the novel?

11

What message does Allende send about the power of writing and the imagination? Is this novel an imaginative plea and personal allegory for peace, women's rights, class differences, human rights, and family respect/responsibility after so much discord, disagreement, exile, and persecution? What is the value of writing or other expressions of imagination for the characters? Why is Allende putting so much emphasis on writing your/her personal history? Some characters you may want to explore in your analysis: Clara, Rosa, Blanca, Alba, Pedro Tercero García, and Esteban Trueba.

12

Examine the importance of destiny in *The House of the Spirits*. Does the novel as a whole favor the idea that the future is pre-planned, or does it suggest that events are up to chance? Use specific incidents in the Trueba family history to support your claim.

13

Clara, who is clairvoyant, has a vision of her mother's demembered head, lost after a fatal crash. Find instances of dismemberment in the novel. What does the act of dismemberment represent beyond its physical consequences? How is it a symbol of family strife, divisions, exiles, seperations, and sufferings.

14

Pablo Neruda was a Nobel Prize winning poet from Allende's Chile. Neruda's socialism endangered him with the Chilean Nationalists, and followers of Pinochet. Like Isabel Allende, who was related to Chilean socialist leader Salvador Allende, he left Chile at one point to escape persecution. Today, we see her novel as a record of those conflicts, and a plea to end the cycles of violence and human rights abuses, so families can live their lives out in peace, without fear. Should our poetry of universal human expression and humanism (of life and love) be important than the politics we keep? Allende includes the following quote by Pablo Neruda as the epigraph to the novel: "How much does a man live, after all? / Does he live a thousand days, or one only? / For a week, or for several centuries? / How long does a man spend dying? / What does it mean to say "for ever?" Using specific evidence, explain how the epigraph relates to the novel's greater message.

15

Evaluate the significance of names in *The House of the Spirits*. What do characters' names tell us about their personalities and destinies? Some to consider: Nivea (snow,) Clara (light, clear), Blanca (white,) Alba (dawn,) Pedro Segundo (second)/Pedro Tercero (The third,) Esteban Trueba/Esteban García, Transito Soto. How many symbols can you find in these characters, and do they represent any of their human traits?