



# Love in the Time of Violence: The Genius Dichotomy Behind *The House of Saints*

By: Mateo Herrera

Each generation breeds a writer that carries with them an age-old voice of storytelling. The author is familiar, yet fresh. They are relatable, yet somewhat otherworldly. Over the centuries, these messengers of the Arts have shared with us universal truths using the tools of their time and the aid of their personal experiences.

Our generation has given us Natalia Fuentes Amaya.

The Colombian-born writer has devoted herself to the magical-realism of South America and intends on sharing it with the rest of the world. With her pen, she honors literary titans obscured by modern life. With her wit, she adapts timeless themes into a contemporary

mindset. Her work is raw, poignant, and extremely refreshing to read during an increasingly restless era of mankind.

Her latest play, *The House of Saints*, has become the most accurate testament to her mission as a writer.

The story takes place in a remote Colombian village in the 1970's. After finding her mother's diaries, Ana, a young prostitute, discovers that her life is a recycled version of her family's secret past. As she learns more, the audience is taken back and forth between Ana's timeline and her mother's, in order to witness their paralleled struggles through both of their eyes. In essence, the 1-act play is about a girl searching for her mother, but take a closer look and you will find a wealth of lessons waiting to be discovered.

Fuentes did not shy away from discussing politics, war, religion, sexuality, and love in its many forms. She wove the topics so carefully into written word that the reader often feels the impact of the emotional onslaught long before they realize what hit them. In this battle of vice and virtue, contrast is the weapon of choice, and let it be known that dichotomy cuts deep.

### **The Child of Love and War**

Flipping open the script of *The House of Saints*, one of the first pages that the reader comes across recounts the modern history of Colombia and sets the stage for a country rife with turmoil. Between 1950 and 1970, Colombia was in the midst of an undeclared civil war that resulted in the deaths of around 200,000 people. Liberal and Conservative militias were at each other's throats, attempting to acquire territory by whatever means necessary. To emphasize the horrors that were inflicted on the rural parts of the country, where most of the bloodshed took place, Fuentes aptly named the fictional town in the story Sangre, meaning "blood."

As we are introduced to the residents of the impoverished town, it becomes apparent that there is a deep-rooted anger present in all of them. They seem to have been born with an impatient, resentful disposition and you can understand why. In their veins, they inherited a fight that they never started, one they feel they must continue. Their world is a cruel and unfair one. It is all they have ever known and time will not let them forget it.

But true as the story is to the indecency of life, true it must also be to life's sweetness. For love can bloom anywhere. Even in a place as sordid as a brothel, our characters find a way to keep love alive. In the timelines of Ana and her mother, both women discover what love means to them in their most hopeless state. They are forced to examine what a powerful tool it can be when used correctly, but this never comes easy.

The war had taken away all the young men of the town, and pushed those who remained to their very limits. We learn that Ana's mother was initially averse to the idea of prostitution and that she was confronted with the argument: "Good men like your brothers are forced to hate for a living. It's only natural that a woman should love for one." This completely deconstructs her mindset and puts her on another path. And when Ana dreams of a better life, of changing her path, she must still resort to prostitution until she can ever think of achieving it.

The play is about the cycles of love and violence. Love, as our vehicle, takes us through the violent history of a country that refused to choose one over the other. The themes are intertwined, bound together by fate, and beg the question: Is war the opposition of love?

Well, the character Carmela put it this way: "Maybe this war is not about hate. Maybe it is about who loves the country more."

### **Adoration and Exploitation**

Another great contrast in the story exists between the religious undertones and the overt sexual nature of the plot. This could not be more obvious than in the name of the brothel, as well as the title of the play, "The House of Saints." The name was given by the men of the town who viewed the young women there as holy creatures that could deliver them, however briefly, from their own bleak existence. In a sense, it became a house of worship.

Religion and prostitution - seemingly opposite, but the author is poised to reveal them as equally useful methods of survival. Both of them serve as a refuge for desperate people looking to feel something that they otherwise lack, something that will keep them going. Any guess what that may be?

Love, of course.

Love is what everyone needs. It is the feeling of belonging, a union with something greater than yourself. It is the ultimate reward, making it the ultimate currency. It is what many put their faith into, and in our story, we find a lot of desperate people searching for something to believe in. Even Ana's mother redirects her devotion from the altar of the Virgin Mary in her room, to the needs of her own disciples.

The concept of needing something to put your faith into brings to mind the choices that were being made by a lot of people at that time. Farmers and other peasant-folk were forced to assume whichever guerilla ideology would ensure they live to see the next day. They conformed for survival, the same way the prostitutes of our play did. Everyone must reconcile with their actions, as well as their beliefs.

In discussion with the author, Fuentes posed this question: “Is it better to survive as a prostitute, or die poor?”

There was no immediate answer to be given. As humans we have an innate desire to live, but as moral creatures, we have a distinct aspiration to dignify ourselves. That was the point she was trying to make. As difficult as it is to answer a hypothetical question, it is even more difficult to wake up one day and choose either a lifestyle that compromises your morals or a death at the hands of starvation. Before casting any judgement, we are meant to consider the context our characters find themselves in.

### **The Triumph of Love Over Lifetimes**

While it may not seem as moving as the emotional events of the play, politics are indeed at the subtle core of *The House of Saints*. This is made clear when Ana wants to learn so much about her family’s past, yet to the dismay of her mentor, pays no attention to her country’s past - the cause of all the pain in the story. Where she refuses to learn her lessons is where the real social commentary lies.

Fuentes wants the audience to know that they could be just as bad as the people they read about in history books. Everyone is quick to pass judgement upon those whose experiences we could not possibly imagine for ourselves, but people make difficult decisions, and for their own reasons. The characters in our story are no different. They have their own traumas and desires, dreams and fears. These motivations persist through time and human nature, yet we think that because years separate us we are so different. That could not be further from the truth.

Even Ana, without knowing it, found herself making the same decisions that her mother did. Different year on the calendar, yes, but the same motivations remain. How many lifetimes are there to live? How many templates? History, we have been told, repeats itself. But how are we ever going to break the cycle if we cannot learn from it?

The answer lies with love. Nobody these days considers forgiveness because it can be one of the most difficult things to do, but once you view a situation through the lens of love, it makes forgiveness possible. Similar to the way Ana had to take a hard look at her mother’s decisions and the decisions of herself, the author encourages the audience to use empathy in order to relate to those we judge. That is when true understanding is achieved. Once we empathize with those under our scrutiny, we finally allow ourselves to progress. For love is the gatekeeper to reconciliation.

Colombia has been in a cycle for centuries, but Natalia Fuentes Amaya envisions a brighter future, one where the cycle is broken. Now, she fights with love.

Many trials lie in the battle between love, loss, and the unceasing influence of time.

But love will always win.

**You can view Natalia's full portfolio here:**

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