

## ***Death and the Maiden: Act 1, Scene 4***

*“During all these years, not an hour has passed that I haven’t heard it next to my ear... you think I’d forget a voice like that?”*

A pivotal scene in Ariel Dorfman’s play, Act 1 Scene 4 opens the morning after Paulina has tied up and gagged Doctor Roberto Miranda, the man she suspects of imprisoning, raping, and torturing her during the dark days of the previous dictatorship. Paulina begins to interrogate Roberto, demanding a confession as she accuses him of specific violations. Somehow managing to keep a calm demeanour, Roberto denies the accusations against him, claiming he was never involved in such acts.

Gerardo is caught between his loyalty to his wife and his commitment to his truth commission. He tries to calm Paulina and reiterates his faith in justice and the legal system. He fears the consequences of her actions and argues for due process. The scene throws the themes of the play – revenge vs justice – into sharp relief, even while Paulina reverses the power dynamics and takes control of events into her own hands.

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### **Knowledge Check**

*Try to answer these questions from memory:*

**1. Act 1 Scene 4 is set at what time?**

- (a) Before dawn
- (b) Morning
- (c) Noon
- (d) Teatime

**2. Coincidentally, what does Paulina say her university friend was called?**

- (a) Pyrene Dubau Hirigoyen
- (b) Ana Maria Miranda
- (c) Roberta Flack
- (d) Paulina Tolero Rivera

**3. Who composed the Death and the Maiden quartet?**

- (a) Schubert
- (b) Rachmaninov
- (c) Handel
- (d) Brahms

**4. What sandwiches does Paulina remember her torturer liking to eat?**

- (a) Ham and Mayonnaise
- (b) Cheese and Tomato
- (c) BLT
- (d) Tuna and Sweetcorn

**5. What convinces Paulina she has kidnapped the real torturer?**

- (a) His facial features
- (b) His body’s build
- (c) The licence plate on his car
- (d) The sound of his voice

**6. Why does Paulina shoot the gun?**

- (a) She’s trying to kill Roberto
- (b) She’s trying to kill Gerardo
- (c) She wants to scare Roberto
- (d) It was an accident

**7. Gerardo says they are not competing for ‘some...’ what?**

- (a) Horror prize
- (b) Thriller trophy
- (c) Trauma award
- (d) Bragging right

**8. What has Paulina arranged to arrive in this scene?**

- (a) An ambulance
- (b) Breakfast delivery
- (c) A tow truck
- (d) The police

**9. What does Gerardo say to Paulina at the end of the scene?**

- (a) “You’re crazy”
- (b) “You’re unrecognisable”
- (c) “You’re wrong”
- (d) “You’re making a mistake”

**10. What does Paulina say she and Gerardo are going to do to Roberto?**

- (a) Murder him and hide the body
- (b) Turn him in to the police
- (c) Put him on trial
- (d) Let him go

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## Understanding and Interpretation

1. How does the way this scene begins (Paulina's monologue) suggest ideas about the power reversal on stage? Can you comment on both what she talks about and how she talks?
2. What is the importance of the piece of music Death and the Maiden to Paulina? What does Paulina say are her feelings towards this piece? What does this reveal about the impact of what happened to her in the past?
3. What is Gerardo's reaction to Paulina's actions and dialogue in this scene? What position does he take?
4. What is the importance of the gun in this scene?
5. What does this scene reveal about Paulina's motivations? More than once she admits she might be 'mad' or 'crazy'. But is this explanation convincing? What does she really want?

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## Important Symbolism: *the gun*

*“As soon as I stop pointing it at you, all dialogue will automatically terminate. If I put it down you’ll use your strength to win the argument.”*

Paulina’s ability to put Roberto on trial depends on her possession of a single item: the gun. At the instant of taking possession of the gun, Paulina becomes the most powerful figure on the stage. As long as she holds the gun, she has control over the situation. At one moment in scene 4, Gerardo begs Paulina to put down the gun, arguing that: *‘while you point it at me, there is no possible dialogue.’* On the contrary, Paulina knows Gerardo will overpower her if she agrees, stating: *‘As soon as I stop pointing it at you, all dialogue will automatically terminate.’* Holding the gun gives her the chance to talk the way she wants to for once. Now Gerardo has to listen, unable to argue with her or cut her off the way he did in the previous scenes. Therefore, she refuses his plea and keeps the gun.



*This poster promoting the 1994 cinema release of Death and the Maiden reveals how Paulina relies on the gun to help her exert power over the men in the play.*

As a subconsciously phallic symbol, the gun is a typical representation of the male capacity for violence. Generally (not always, but often enough) bigger and stronger, men are usually able to control women by virtue of their size and strength. Paulina knows this all too well, having been forcibly imprisoned, tortured, and raped by a group of men years ago. Paulina’s mimicry of the way they spoke at the time reveals them revelling in the power they held over her. The men used sexual swear words, calling her a *‘bitch’* and a *‘cunt’*, in a way that brutalised and objectified her, before performing depraved and violent acts upon her. Paulina’s experience has convinced her of the (male) capacity for violence and depravity that is often unleashed upon women.

Therefore, Paulina’s seizing of the gun symbolises her seizure of the means to inflict violence on others, taking a traditionally masculine power into her sphere of control. Ironically, involves her mimicking the tactics by which many other women were made to suffer under the dictatorship, just as she

so easily mimicked the voices of her captors. However, in the heat of the moment, perhaps Paulina thinks she is justified. Life has taught her that control of this situation depends upon the threat of violence being in her hands.

## Activity

Skim and scan the play so far and create a timeline of all the moments when the gun is mentioned in either stage directions or dialogue. Annotate your timeline with explainers as to the dramatic and symbolic effects of the gun at each moment.

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