

Death and the Maiden: Act 1, Scenes 1 – 3

“You hear the relatives of the victims, you denounce the crimes, what happens to the criminals?”

The play opens one evening in Gerardo and Paulina’s secluded beach house in a country like Chile in 1990 while power transfers from a fallen dictator to a democratically elected government. Gerardo Escobar, a lawyer recently appointed to a commission investigating human rights’ abuses, returns home late after his car breaks down. His wife, Paulina Salas, listens as he explains his new role and the commission’s mandate. She’s guardedly supportive but privately holds reservations about the commission’s limited powers.

Later that night, an unexpected knock on the door introduces the play’s third character: Doctor Roberto Miranda, who helped Gerardo fix his car. Gerardo invites him in. Paulina, listening from an adjoining room, grows tense when she hears the doctors voice. She recognises him as someone who kidnapped, tortured and raped her during the dictatorship. Dismissing her claim, Gerardo goes to bed, but Paulina is certain. Taking matters into her own hands, she finds a gun, and enters Roberto’s room, tying him up and gagging him so he can’t get away. The stage is set for a ‘trial’ which will pit victim against perpetrator, husband against wife, and truth against suspicion, uncertainty, and the ever-changing shadows of the past.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. What sound can be heard on stage as the play opens?

- (a) The sound of the sea
- (b) The sound of the wind
- (c) Gunshots
- (d) Music playing on the radio

2. What is NOT part of the setting as described in the opening stage directions?

- (a) Dinner on the table
- (b) A cassette recorder
- (c) A portrait of General Pinochet
- (d) A lamp

3. What happened to Gerardo’s jack (a tool used to fix a flat tire)?

- (a) It’s rusted
- (b) It was stolen
- (c) Nothing happened
- (d) Paulina lent it to her mother

4. What does Paulina name the stranger who assisted Gerardo?

- (a) His guardian angel
- (b) An interfering do-gooder
- (c) A good Samaritan
- (d) A kind soul

5. If the Commission goes well, what position might Gerardo be appointed to in the future?

- (a) Minister of Justice
- (b) Undersecretary
- (c) Minister of Defence
- (d) President

6. Where did Roberto hear about Gerardo?

- (a) On the radio
- (b) From a neighbour
- (c) In the newspaper
- (d) He didn’t hear about Gerardo

7. What drink does Gerardo offer Roberto if he returns on Sunday?

- (a) Mojito
- (b) Margarita
- (c) Martini
- (d) Mai-Tai

8. What time do Gerardo and Roberto go to bed?

- (a) 11pm
- (b) 12 midnight
- (c) 1am
- (d) 2am

9. What item does Paulina use to gag Roberto?

- (a) Stockings
- (b) A plastic bag
- (c) Her panties
- (d) A rope

10. What else does Paulina take from Roberto?

- (a) His diary
- (b) His car keys
- (c) His wallet
- (d) His passport

Understanding and Interpretation

1. The country that the characters live in has just transitioned from dictatorship to democracy, a supposedly more civil and stable form of society. But, from the atmosphere on stage, it's clear that this newfound stability is precarious. What makes the audience feel this way?
2. From the beginning of the play, it's clear Paulina Salas is agitated. What clues in her dialogue and action create this sense?
3. What do we learn about the commission that Gerardo is appointed to? What is its mandate and limitations? How do Paulina and Gerardo feel about the commission?
4. The way Roberto Miranda knocks on the door in the middle of the night is unexpected and a little ominous. Is there anything suspicious about the doctor's sudden arrival and his jovial tone in his interactions with Gerardo? Or are his intentions genuine?
5. Act 1 Scene 3 is a short scene made of stage directions and is entirely wordless. What comments can you make about this scene? For example, how do Paulina's actions mirror the themes of the play so far? Are there any uses of symbolism in the scene? What might the effect of this scene be on an audience in a darkened theatre?

Historical Context: *transition to democracy*

"This is said straight from the heart, this Commission is going to help us close an exceptionally painful chapter in our history."

In interviews and other writing, Ariel Dorfman has said that he wrote *Death and the Maiden* to explore what happens when a dictatorship transitions into a democracy. In the preface to his play, Dorfman writes: *'the time is the present and the place, a country that is probably Chile but could be any country that has given itself a democratic government just after a long period of dictatorship.'* In particular, *Death and the Maiden* explores how a country reckons with wrongdoing in the past. How should people hold to account the perpetrators of historical crimes? Who should bear responsibility and how should they be punished? How can the guilty be separated from the innocent? There are no easy answers to these difficult questions.

While stating that the setting is only *'probably Chile'*, the history of Dorfman's adopted country looms large over the play. Born in Argentina, Dorfman's family moved to the US before settling in Chile when he was 12 years old. In the early 1970s, after completing his education at the university of Santiago, Dorfman worked for Salvador Allende, Chile's president. In 1973 a military coup led by General Pinochet overthrew the government and Dorfman was forced to flee the country (he returned to the US). The new dictator banned Dorfman's writing and ordered copies of his books to be burned. Dorfman continued to write and publish in exile.

Death and the Maiden was written in a period of time between 1985 and 1990 and was first staged in London in 1991. It deals with Chile's pained transition back to democracy after the fall of Pinochet's government. Under Pinochet's 16-year junta, the constitution was suspended, congress dissolved, and opposition political parties banned. Thousands were detained by Pinochet's secret police (the DINA), many of whom 'disappeared' without official record. Human rights' abuses were widespread, including torture, imprisonment without trial, and execution. The circumstances of Dorfman's play mirrors this history. Paulina, a former political prisoner, embodies the trauma of thousands who suffered under Pinochet's regime. Gerardo's role as head of an investigatory commission resembles truth and reconciliation commissions that Chile established in real life. The central feature of the play – Paulina's 'trial' of Roberto – dramatizes a social division in Chile's post-dictatorship period: should victims forgive and forget so the country can move on, or should they be able to seek closure through truth, justice, or reparations?

Activity

Research any or all of the historical Truth Commissions in the following contexts. Try to discover what the abuses were mandated to investigate, the scope of the investigations, whether they published reports, and how successful the commissions were thought to have been:

- Bolivia, 1982 (National Commission of Inquiry into Disappearances)
- Germany, 1992 (truth commission to investigate human rights violations in East Germany)
- Ghana, 2001 (National Reconciliation Commission)
- Zimbabwe, 1985 (established to investigate the killing of dissidents in Matabeleland)
- Sri Lanka, 1994 (Commissions of Inquiry into Involuntary Removal or Disappearance of Persons)
- Chile, 1991 (National Commission for Truth and Reconciliation)

Important Theme: *casual misogyny*

"We are going to explore all the frontiers, my friend, and we will still have that unpredictable female soul..."

Gerardo Escobar is Paulina's husband. He's described as a man of around forty-five (of similar age to his wife) and has just been appointed to head up a new commission investigating atrocities committed under the previous regime. Throughout Act 1 Scene 1, Gerardo presents this offer to his wife as if he's still holding out on it; he wants to discuss it with her first, he says. However, later in the scene, it's revealed that Gerardo has already agreed to take the position.

This small lie plants a seed of suspicion in the audience's mind that perhaps Gerardo is more concerned about his career than his wife. He knows about the trauma she's been through and wants her to move on from her past and heal, but he doesn't always seem to be sensitive as to how she can make peace with what has happened to her. Further, as Act 1 opens, there's a palpable tension between husband and wife. They disagree over who is responsible for the flat tire: while Gerardo was driving the car, Paulina loaned the jack to her mother. Without this tool, Gerardo was stranded and his dialogue reveals his frustration. *"Do you know what a normal man does when he gets a flat?"* Gerardo asks rhetorically: *"He goes to the trunk and gets out the spare. If his wife happened to remember to fix the spare, right?"* His casual language conceals a pointed accusation; what happened to Gerardo was her fault.

In fact, running throughout the first two scenes, and the rest of the play, is a vein of barely concealed casual misogyny displayed by Gerardo and Roberto towards Paulina. They laugh together at the idiocy of women and agree that women are fundamentally mysterious and unknowable. Gerardo sometimes patronizes Paulina, and while this might be unintentional, it shows his mindset about male and female roles, responsibilities, and power dynamics.

Later in the play, Dorfman sharpens the casual misogyny of these opening exchanges to reveal how the violence of the previous regime possessed a gendered aspect. Her rapists and torturers used sexually explicit and gendered language against her, calling her a *'bitch'* (a word Gerardo used unwittingly in the first lines of the play) and investigating how torture affected her *'sex'*. As the play develops, small details compile until the audience is in no doubt: whether in the past or the present, under dictatorship or democracy, Paulina lives in a world dominated by men.

Activity

Comb the first two scenes for instances that reveal Gerardo (and Roberto's) casual misogyny. You may also find clues in what Paulina says and how she reacts to Gerardo's dialogue. Collect several moments together and annotate them with your analysis of how Dorfman reveals the background of misogyny against which the action plays out.
