

Death and the Maiden: Act 2, Scenes 1 and 2

"I understand that need of hers because it coincides with what we were talking about... the whole country's need to put into words what happened to us."

As Act 2 opens, Paulina has tied up Roberto and begins interrogating him, demanding a confession for the torture she suffered during the dictatorship. She insists that his voice and mannerisms confirm her suspicion that he is one of her kidnappers. Roberto denies any involvement and maintains he is innocent. Gerardo – caught between loyalty to his wife and his own principles – tries to mediate, urging Paulina to release Roberto and let justice take its course. Paulina argues that the system will never punish people like Roberto and that victims deserve to know the truth.

The conflict intensifies throughout the two scenes of this act. Gerardo stands for justice through legality, while Paulina argues for the truth. Her vivid memories clash against the denialism of the two men. Tension grows as Paulina persuades Gerardo to help her stage her own 'trial' – with the stakes no less than Roberto's life in the balance.

Knowledge Check

Try to answer these questions from memory:

1. When does Act 2 Scene 1 open?

- (a) Morning
- (b) Midday
- (c) Afternoon
- (d) Evening

2. What did Paulina's kidnappers want?

- (a) Money
- (b) Revenge
- (c) Gerardo's name
- (d) Nothing

3. What illness does Roberto say Paulina has

- (a) Paranoia
- (b) Histrionics
- (c) Dependency syndrome
- (d) Schizophrenia

4. How does Paulina want to record Roberto's confession?

- (a) By writing it down
- (b) Using a cassette recorder
- (c) By remembering it
- (d) On a video camera

5. What did Gerardo promise Paulina?

- (a) To put all of her kidnappers on trial
- (b) To get revenge on all of her kidnappers
- (c) To put Paulina's testimony in the commission report
- (d) That he would help her recover

6. With what implement did Paulina fantasise about torturing Roberto?

- (a) A cattle prod
- (b) A broom
- (c) A knife
- (d) A hammer

7. What does Gerardo feed Roberto at the start of Act 2 Scene 2?

- (a) Soup
- (b) Steak
- (c) Salad
- (d) Sandwiches

8. What other sensory memory has convinced Paulina Roberto is her torturer?

- (a) His skin
- (b) His voice
- (c) His smell
- (d) All of the above

9. How does Gerardo think Roberto can save his own life?

- (a) Indulge Paulina
- (b) Try to escape
- (c) Deny all involvement
- (d) Wait for the police to arrive

10. At the end of Act 2, what is Gerardo going to tell Paulina?

- (a) That Roberto is innocent
- (b) That they should murder Roberto
- (c) That Roberto needs a piss
- (d) That Roberto wants to confess

Understanding and Interpretation

1. How does Dorfman explore the idea that physical strength and power are not the only kinds of power in Act 2?
2. Look at what happens when Roberto's gag is removed. What are the first things he says? What are his instinctive behaviours or strategies? What might Dorfman be wanting us to notice?
3. Gerardo and Paulina have a private discussion on the terrace away from Roberto, in which they talk about what happened to her in the past. What differences do you see in the way the characters relate to what happened?
4. Gerardo is alone with Roberto at the start of Act 2 Scene 2. Can you describe their interaction? What kind of tone or bond (?) exists between the two?
5. Why does Gerardo lose his temper at the end of this act? What themes or ideas is Dorfman exploring in these moments?

Important Character: **Gerardo Escobar**

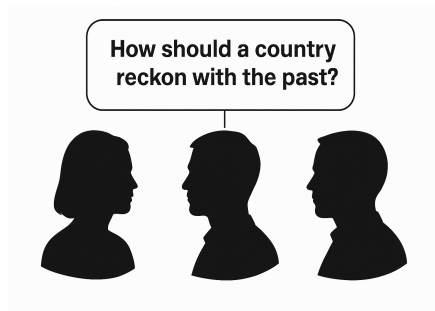
"I'm tired of being in the middle, in between the two of you."

Gerardo Escobar is a lawyer and a leader of the commission tasked with investigating human rights abuses committed under the former dictatorship. He represents the institutional approach to justice during Chile's transition to democracy, an approach that prioritizes stability and reconciliation over punishment. Gerardo believes in dialogue and legal frameworks, even when these fail to deliver full accountability. For example, in Act Two Scene 1 he says to Paulina: *'If he's guilty, more reason to set him free... Imagine what would happen if everyone acted like you did.'* This makes him a figure of compromise: he wants truth, but only within the boundaries of law. His faith in democratic processes contrast sharply with Paulina's insistence on retribution, positioning him as a pragmatic voice rather than a figure who is willing to seek radical justice.

However, his position is sorely tested in Act 2. He becomes deeply conflicted as he mediates between Paulina and Roberto, torn between his principles and his loyalty to his wife. While he initially insists on due process, Gerardo eventually agrees to draft a confession for Roberto under Paulina's pressure. This compromise implies his moral ambiguity: he is neither fully committed to legal purity nor entirely aligned with Paulina's quest for vengeance. Act 2 exposes Gerardo's struggle to maintain control in a tense situation where rationality slips away.

Additionally, Gerardo's character is closely linked to traditional notions of masculinity, such as authority, logic, and control. He assumes the role of protector, trying to shield Paulina from her own impulses and restore order to their home. His confidence in reason and law reflects a masculine ideal of power rooted in institutions (such as the government, or the courts). However, his masculinity is sabotaged when Paulina seizes agency by taking up the gun and dictating terms. Gerardo's inability to assert dominance in this moment reveals the fragility of his masculinity. When Gerardo finally loses his cool, it's because of Roberto's challenge to what remains of his masculinity (*'Roberto: You're the one who's going to kill me, it's what any man would do, any real man.'*) Gerardo shouts, *'I'm going to get the gun and blow your brains out.'* Ironically, his threat to Roberto implies his emasculation – when Paulina took the gun she took power away from him.

Activity



Death and the Maiden is a three-person play. Each of the three central characters represents a possible response to the question of how a country should reckon with the atrocities of the past.

Investigate the dialogue of Gerardo, Paulina and Roberto throughout Act 2 and explain what you think are their positions on this essential question. Create a small graphic organizer to record your ideas, including a summary and key quotations that reflect their respective positions.
