

## ***Death and the Maiden: Act 3, 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."*

Act 3 ends the standoff between Paulina and Roberto as the doctor, still tied up, delivers a confession, admitting to torturing Paulina during the dictatorship. Paulina listens, confirming details of her ordeal. Roberto insists the confession is coerced and continues to protest his innocence, creating ambiguity about the truth. However, Paulina points to details of the confession that Roberto could only have known if he was present at the time. Her determination contrasts with Gerardo's desperation to end the stand-off peacefully. The scene revolves around the moral question: is justice being served or distorted?

The play's final scene skips ahead in time. Gerardo has finished his work with the Commission, and the report is being published. He and Paulina are attending a concert. However, tension between them lingers. The play closes with a haunting image as Paulina sees Roberto in the audience. It is not clear whether he is really there or a figment of Paulina's imagination. Their silent exchange implies a lack of closure, asking the audience whether absolute truth in the aftermath of political violence is an attainable goal.

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### **Knowledge Check**

*Try to answer these questions from memory:*

**1. When does Act 3 Scene 1 open?**

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

**2. Gerardo admits to cheating on Paulina while she was missing – how many times?**

- (a) Once
- (b) Twice
- (c) Three times
- (d) Ten times

**3. What date was Paulina kidnapped?**

- (a) December 3rd 1972
- (b) February 14<sup>th</sup> 1973
- (c) April 6<sup>th</sup> 1975
- (d) October 27<sup>th</sup> 1979

**4. What detail does Paulina remember about her kidnapper?**

- (a) His nails were too long
- (b) He was clean shaven
- (c) He walked with a limp
- (d) He had garlic on his breath

**5. Why does Roberto say he initially agreed to join the torture sessions?**

- (a) Out of medical curiosity
- (b) To save people's lives
- (c) He supported the dictatorship's methods
- (d) They offered him money

**6. What was the name of one of the kidnappers?**

- (a) Bob
- (b) Len
- (c) Bud
- (d) Stud

**7. How many prisoners does Roberto confess to have interrogated?**

- (a) Twenty seven
- (b) Sixty six
- (c) Eighty one
- (d) Ninety four

**8. Who's music plays at the end of Act 3 Scene 1?**

- (a) Mozart
- (b) Schubert
- (c) Rachmaninov
- (d) Dvorjak

**9. Why was an old woman who testified in front of Gerardo's Commission so moved?**

- (a) She was getting justice
- (b) She was asked to sit down
- (c) She was offered tea
- (d) She was pretending

**10. Paulina mixes a margarita that...?**

- (a) Will make your eyes pop
- (b) Blows your socks off
- (c) Will make your hair stand on end
- (d) Is worth a million bucks

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## Understanding and Interpretation

1. At the beginning of Act 3 Scene 1, Gerardo says to Paulina: *'people can die from an excessive dose of the truth'*. Why is this line so pointed, even ironic?
2. Dorfman stages the confession intentionally. Paulina begins speaking, telling Gerardo everything that happened after all these years. Partway through the lights go down, and Roberto's voice takes over. In what ways is the staging of the confession so effective?
3. Roberto's confession, whether true or not, describes how a man can descend from civilisation into savagery. What does he tell us about this process?
4. At the end of Act 3 Scene 1 a giant mirror descends. What are your thoughts about the symbolism of the mirror?
5. During the final scene of the play, Paulina and Gerardo see Roberto again at the concert. Do you think Roberto is really there or is he a figment of Paulina's imagination? What does his presence imply either way?

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### Important Character: *Roberto Miranda*

*"If you want to kill me, do it. But you're killing an innocent man."*

Doctor Roberto Miranda is the play's most difficult character. He first enters as a 'good Samaritan' who helped Gerardo when his car broke down. However, very quickly suspicion is aroused when, after hearing on the radio that Gerardo has been appointed to the president's truth Commission, he unexpectedly returns to the Escobar's beach house in the middle of the night. Is he genuinely excited at the opportunity for the country to heal or is his earnestness covering up his own complicity with the previous dictatorship? In this way Dorfman establishes ambiguity as the central feature of Roberto's character. Is he innocent, or is he truly Paulina's former torturer? While the circumstantial evidence scattered through the play certainly points in the direction of his guilt, Dorfman carefully leaves the question unresolved, so Roberto remains a symbol of the uncertainty surrounding truth in a transitional society.

The ambiguity around Roberto's character intensifies in Act 3 as he reads the confession that Gerardo has drafted. His delivery is resigned, implying he knows the words he's speaking are true. However, he continues to assert his innocence, casting doubt on whether the confession reflects truth or coercion. His silent presence in the final scene is similarly haunting. Lit by a '*phantasmagoric*' light, Dorfman teases the audience with multiple possibilities: is Roberto really there or is he a figment of the Escobar's imaginations? Did Paulina kill him or set him free? Is he guilty or a victim of mistaken identity? Continuous ambiguity forces audiences to accept the fragility of truth, the impossibility of certainty, and the challenges of seeking justice in societies scarred by a violent past.

### Activity

The question of Roberto's guilt lingers at the play's end, leaving the audience suspended between competing narratives and robbing them of the resolution they might crave. Dorfman's play resists easy answers, yet this ambiguity also encourages critical thinking and discussion long after the curtain comes down. Use the following ideas to consider the implications of Roberto's guilt and innocence. What does it mean for your understanding of the play in either scenario?

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What does it mean for...

1. Truth and justice?
2. Closure for victims of violence?
3. The possibility of forgiveness?
4. Rule of law vs vigilantism?
5. A woman reclaiming power in a patriarchal society?



**If Roberto  
is guilty?**

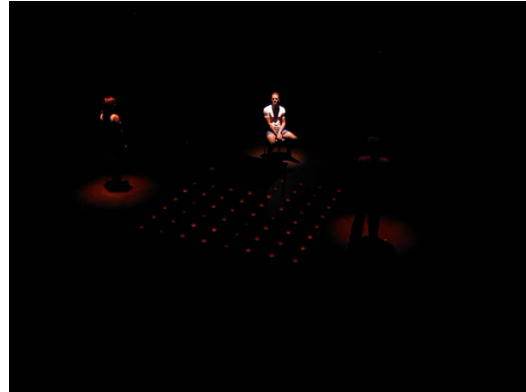


**If Roberto is  
innocent?**

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## Drama Study: *Roberto's Confession*

*"A kind of – brutalization took over my life, I began to truly like what I was doing."*



*Lighting transforms the stage during Roberto's confession at the Globe Theatre's 2008 production of *Death and the Maiden**

Roberto's confession is, arguably, the most important element of *Death and the Maiden*. He describes how he, a doctor sworn to help others, abandoned his calling and learned to take pleasure in people's suffering. What began as '*morbid curiosity*' about the effect of stress and pain on the body morphed into sadism and brutality. In writing Roberto's confession, Dorfman drew on the testimonies of survivors of abuse during Chile's dictatorship. So, while Roberto and Paulina are fictional characters, their stories are real. To some extent, this negates the question of whether Roberto is personally guilty; even if he did not commit the acts Paulina forced him to recount, nevertheless they are true actions that were inflicted upon people like Paulina – tens of thousands of people across Chile and beyond, who have been the victims of state-sanctioned violence.

Therefore, by making the audience listen to this testimony, Dorfman forces people to confront the violence that lurks beneath the surface of society. Further, the gruesome details that Roberto recounts are not specific to Chile, they echo atrocities committed across human history. Such familiarity should make us think that violence is not confined to history, or the responsibility of a single culture or nation, but a possibility that haunts every people in every place.

### Analytical Writing Practice

In *Death and the Maiden*, Roberto's confession, whether genuine or coerced, forces the audience to confront the brutal reality of torture and the ease with which civilization can collapse into cruelty. This moment raises questions about truth, justice, and the fragility of moral codes in times of political upheaval. Ariel Dorfman uses this confession not only to dramatize Paulina's trauma but also to expose the violent potential that lies beneath society's surface of civility.

At the end of the play, a mirror descends during the concert scene. Consider how the mirror interacts with the themes explored in Roberto's confession. What does the mirror symbolize (e.g. truth, self-reflection, or collective responsibility)? How might it implicate the audience in the moral questions raised by the play? Write a passage analysing the symbolism of the mirror at the end of *Death and the Maiden*.