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.

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 14th 1973
(c) April 6th 1975
(d) October 27th 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

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?

Drama Study: *Roberto's Confession*

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

Roberto Miranda is the play's most ambiguous character. Throughout Death and the Maiden, Dorfman deliberately leaves audiences uncertain whether Roberto is truly Paulina's former torturer or the victim of a terrible mistake. Although circumstantial evidence points towards his guilt, Roberto repeatedly maintains his innocence, making him a symbol of the uncertainty surrounding truth in societies recovering from political violence. Even his arrival at the Escobars' house raises suspicion. Having already helped Gerardo earlier in the evening, Roberto unexpectedly returns after hearing the news of Gerardo's appointment to the Truth Commission. His apparent enthusiasm for national reconciliation may be sincere, yet it also invites audiences to wonder whether he has a personal interest in controlling how the past is remembered.

This ambiguity becomes particularly significant in Roberto's confession. Forced to read the statement prepared by Gerardo and Paulina, Roberto describes how a doctor sworn to heal and protect others became fascinated by suffering and gradually learned to take pleasure in it. What begins as *"morbid curiosity"* about the effects of pain on the human body morphs into cruelty and torture. The confession is disturbing not only because of its content, but because Roberto delivers it with a sense of resignation that makes it sound convincing. Yet the audience should still feel uncertain about whether Roberto is confessing to crimes he actually committed, or merely repeating words forced upon him by Paulina and drafted by Gerardo.

At the same time, the confession has a significance that extends beyond Roberto himself. In writing this testimony, Dorfman drew heavily on the real experiences of victims who suffered under Chile's dictatorship. As a result, the details Roberto recounts sound authentic and true. Whether Roberto is personally guilty is one question; but the fact remains that the crimes he described genuinely happened to thousands of people. Through dramatizing his confession, Dorfman encourages audiences to wonder less about the mystery of Roberto's personal guilt and accept the reality of political violence that is undeniable.

Roberto's confession therefore becomes one of the most important moments in the play. By forcing audiences to listen to this testimony, Dorfman ensures that the suffering of victims cannot be ignored or forgotten. The play ultimately suggests that establishing the complete truth may be impossible, but confronting past atrocities is essential for individuals and society to move forwards. How best to do this is one of the play's most important – and difficult to answer – questions.

Activity

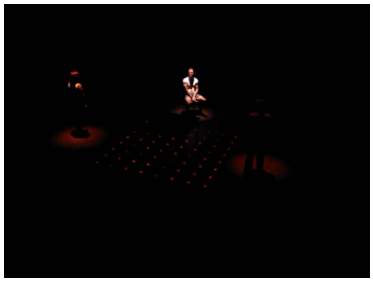
The question of Roberto's guilt lingers at the play's end, leaving the audience suspended between competing narratives and robbing them of the neat resolution they might crave.

Comb through the play and collect all the evidence – both circumstantial and concrete – that you might use to ascertain Roberto's guilt or innocence. Once you have collected everything, ask whether this 'proves' Roberto's guilt or whether an element of doubt remains. Consider whether the evidence is enough to condemn Roberto in a court of law, or whether it justifies his murder at the end of the play. Discuss your thoughts, or write a reflective answer to the question of guilt and innocence in your leaner portfolio.

Drama Study: *Stagecraft*

"The lights go down while the music plays and plays and plays."





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

Although Death and the Maiden is mostly driven by dialogue and character conflict, Ariel Dorfman also uses stagecraft to develop the play's ideas. Stagecraft refers to the theatrical techniques used to create meaning on stage, including lighting, sound, setting, props, costume, and staging. These elements communicate ideas that characters are unwilling or unable to express directly. In *Death and the Maiden*, stagecraft underpin the play's central concerns with truth, memory, justice, violence, and uncertainty.

One of the most striking examples occurs at the end of the play during the concert scene, when a giant mirror descends over the stage. On one level, the mirror symbolises truth and self-reflection. Having listened to Roberto's confession, the audience is confronted with its own image. Rather than allowing spectators to remain detached observers, the mirror symbolically places them inside the drama. It raises uncomfortable questions about guilt, justice, responsibility, and forgiveness. If ordinary citizens live alongside injustice, to what extent do they share responsibility for it? Should difficult truths always be uncovered, even when doing so threatens stability and reconciliation? In this way, the mirror extends the play's moral questions beyond the theatre and towards society itself. The audience becomes part of the play's investigation, suggesting that the search for truth cannot happen on the stage alone.

The mirror is but one example of stagecraft throughout the play. Lighting is frequently used to create uncertainty and tension, such as Roberto's confession being delivered under particular lighting conditions, or the way light strafes the stage at the beginning of the play. Sound also plays an important role, from the constant presence of the sea beyond the beach house to the recurring significance of Schubert's *Death and the Maiden* quartet, sounds which influence the atmosphere of the drama or connect to the characters' memories and experiences. The play's setting is equally significant: the action takes place almost entirely within a remote beach house, a location that is physically separated from wider society. This isolation creates an environment in which the normal rules of law and justice are suspended, allowing the conflict between Paulina, Gerardo, and Roberto to unfold beyond the reach of government authority.

Consequently, analysis of drama texts like *Death and the Maiden* requires attention to what audiences see as well as hear onstage. Through lighting, sound, setting, props, and set design, Dorfman brings political and philosophical questions of truth, reconciliation, justice, and revenge into the theatre experience.

Analytical Writing Practice

Choose an element of stagecraft such as lighting, scenery, sound, stage design, or a prop that can be analysed in relation to one of the play's themes. Explore how Dorfman uses this theatrical technique to explore ideas such as truth, justice, memory, guilt, violence, or reconciliation. Consider both the practical function of the stagecraft element and its symbolic significance within the drama. Support your response with specific references to the play and explain how the chosen technique contributes to its wider meanings.