

Death and the Maiden: A Journey Through Justice and Trauma

Ariel Dorfman's masterpiece explores the aftermath of trauma, the pursuit of justice, and the difficult transition from dictatorship to democracy. Set in "probably Chile", this powerful play confronts us with uncomfortable questions about memory, power, and collective responsibility.



Biography of Ariel Dorfman



Origins and Education

Son of Fanny and Adolf Dorfman, an Argentine professor of economics. The family moved from Argentina to the US before settling in Chile when Dorfman was around twelve years old. He completed his studies at the University of Santiago.



Exile and Academic Life

In 1973, he was forced to leave Chile after the military coup led by General Pinochet. He continued writing in the US and became a professor of literature and Latin American studies at Duke University in 1985.



Political Career

In the early 1970s, he worked as a cultural advisor to Salvador Allende, the first socialist president of Chile. His 1971 essay on US imperialism, "How to Read Donald Duck", became a bestseller throughout Latin America.



Literary Work

His best-known work, "Death and the Maiden", was completed in 1990. Much of his work addresses themes of human rights, tyranny, and power. He currently divides his time between Chile and the US.

Historical Context

The Setting

The work takes place in a country that "is probably Chile" and that is certainly experiencing a painful transition from military dictatorship to democracy. It is a response to the overthrow of the socialist government of Salvador Allende by the brutal military dictatorship of General Pinochet in 1973.

The Context

The United States, which disapproved of Allende's government, allegedly supported and even helped Pinochet take power. Shortly after that coup, Argentina also experienced similar turmoil: both countries saw widespread civil repression, "disappearances," torture, and killings.

The Focus

"Death and the Maiden" is not so much about life under an authoritarian dictatorship, but is fundamentally concerned with what happens afterwards: how a country recovers practically and emotionally from the pain, what its people need to do to move forward properly, and whether a nation can truly leave its past behind.

Plot Summary

Initial Scene



Paulina Salas and her husband Gerardo Escobar are in their isolated beach house. Gerardo has been appointed to lead a commission investigating abuses committed during the dictatorship. When he returns home late, Paulina overhears a stranger who helped him with his broken-down car.

Kidnapping and Confrontation



During the night, Paulina ties Roberto to a chair at gunpoint. She insists that he is the doctor who played Schubert while raping her. Gerardo tries to reason with her, but Paulina is determined to hold a private "trial".

Ambiguous Ending



The play ends months later in a concert hall. A giant mirror descends, reflecting the audience. A ghostly figure of Roberto appears as Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" plays, leaving ambiguous whether Paulina killed him or if it is a persistent ghost of her trauma.

Roberto's Arrival



Roberto Miranda, the good Samaritan, visits the house to congratulate Gerardo on his appointment. Paulina, listening hidden, recognizes his voice as that of the doctor who tortured and raped her during the dictatorship, although she was blindfolded.

The Confession



Paulina demands a recorded confession. Roberto finally confesses, describing how he went from a doctor who helped prisoners to a torturer who enjoyed the power. However, it is unclear whether the confession is genuine or fabricated to save his life.

Main Characters



Paulina Salas

A woman in her forties, Gerardo's wife. She was kidnapped, tortured and repeatedly raped during the dictatorship. Her rapist, a doctor, would play Schubert during the attacks.

Paulina represents the search for personal justice when institutions fail. Her trauma remains alive and present, affecting every aspect of her daily life.



Gerardo Escobar

A lawyer in his mid-forties, Paulina's husband. He has just been appointed to lead a commission investigating human rights abuses committed during the previous military dictatorship.

Gerardo represents faith in institutions and the democratic process, though he exhibits casual misogyny and seems more concerned with his career than Paulina's trauma.



Roberto Miranda

A doctor who helps Gerardo when his car breaks down. The central question is his identity: Paulina is convinced he is the doctor who raped and tortured her, while he insists he is innocent.

His use of the phrase "the true true true truth" and the Schubert tape in his car are key details that convince Paulina of his identity as her torturer.

Symbolic Elements



Schubert's Music

Schubert's quartet "Death and the Maiden" appears repeatedly in the work. It represents the perversion of something beautiful (art) turned into an instrument of terror. It was Paulina's favorite piece, but since her rape, it provokes physical nausea in her.



The Pistol

A phallic symbol that allows Paulina to take control of a situation in which she could otherwise be physically dominated. It represents the inversion of power and Paulina's ability to assert her control over her life and her narrative.



The Mirror

At the end of the work, a giant mirror descends from the ceiling of the theater to reflect the audience. This expressionist device asks the spectators to question how they relate to what they have just seen and provokes a reflection on collective responsibility.

Main Themes

Dorfman masterfully weaves these interconnected themes into a powerful exploration of post-dictatorship society. Through Paulina's harrowing journey, the play confronts audiences with profound questions about justice's true nature, trauma's enduring legacy, and the delicate balance between healing individual wounds and rebuilding a fractured nation.

Justice and Reconciliation

The agonizing conflict between personal vengeance and collective healing, challenging whether true justice can exist alongside national reconciliation

Memory and Trauma

The inescapable, visceral presence of past trauma that continues to shape victims' reality long after the physical wounds have healed

Women's Empowerment

Paulina's fierce reclamation of her voice and agency in a system designed to silence and subjugate women's experiences

Authority and Society

The complex, often corrupted relationship between institutional power and individual rights, particularly when justice requires confronting state-sanctioned crimes

Civilization and Violence

The disturbing revelation that barbarism often lurks beneath the veneer of civility, particularly when embodied by educated professionals who become torturers

Memory, Trauma, and the Senses

Auditory Recognition

Paulina recognizes Roberto's voice as that of her torturer, despite having been blindfolded during her captivity

Ghostly Presence

The trauma persists as a ghostly presence in her life, symbolized by the ambiguous appearance of Roberto at the end of the work



Music as a Trigger

The Schubert quartet, once beloved, now provokes physical nausea, demonstrating how trauma alters sensory experience

Olfactory Memory

She recalls specific sensory details such as the scent of her torturer's skin and the garlic breath of her abductors

Dorfman argues that memory, trauma, and the senses are inextricably linked. The work specifically shows the difficulties of overcoming trauma when its sensory impact is permanently etched in the victims' memory, resurfacing when those same senses receive similar stimuli later on.

Authority, Society, and the Public

Dorfman wrote "Death and the Maiden" to study what happens when a dictatorship transforms into a democracy, and how the public relates to this change in authority. The work upholds the idea of collective responsibility, asking how accountability for injustices should be rendered and who should do it. The final mirror forces the audience to consider their own role in society.



Democratic Transition

The work examines the challenges of moving from dictatorship to democracy



Institutional vs. Personal Justice

Contrasts the official commission with Paulina's search for justice



Collective Responsibility

The final mirror implicates the public in the moral issues raised

Contemporary Relevance



Transitional Justice

The play remains relevant for societies emerging from authoritarian regimes around the world, from post-apartheid South Africa to the Arab nations after the Arab Spring. Questions about how to balance truth, justice, and reconciliation remain fundamental.



The #MeToo Movement

Paulina's struggle to be heard and believed resonates powerfully in the #MeToo era, where victims of sexual abuse seek justice against power structures that have historically silenced their voices.



Historical Memory

Debates about how nations should remember and address historical injustices—from slavery to colonialism—reflect the same tensions between remembering and healing that Dorfman's work explores.

More than three decades after its creation, "Death and the Maiden" continues to raise uncomfortable but essential questions about how societies and individuals process trauma, seek justice, and build a future that acknowledges the past without being trapped in it.

Cultural Legacy and Impact



Polanski's Film

The film adaptation by Polanski



Theatrical Productions

Live performances and adaptations



Academic Studies

Scholarly research and analysis



Influence on Other Works

Impact on related creations



Musical Adaptations

Music-based interpretations

"Death and the Maiden" has had a significant cultural impact since its premiere in 1990. It was adapted into a film by Roman Polanski in 1994, starring Sigourney Weaver. The play is part of what Dorfman calls his "Resistance" trilogy, along with "Widows" and "Reader".

Its influence extends beyond the theater, inspiring discussions on human rights, transitional justice, and collective trauma. The play has been performed in countless countries, demonstrating the universality of its themes despite its specific Chilean context.