

## A discussion of the ways in which Ariel Dorfman's play *Death and the Maiden* explores the issues associated with justice and reconciliation on both a personal and political level.

The play *Death and the Maiden* by Chilean dramatist Ariel Dorfman centres upon the dramatic conflict between three main characters, Paulina Salas, Roberto Miranda and Gerardo Escobar. Through them, Dorfman explores some of the issues associated with justice and reconciliation on a personal level, with each character facing difficult decisions and behaving according to their own individual moral principles. However, the relevance of such issues is not restricted to the conflict between these characters; a wider political context can also be considered. The play is set in an unspecified country that has recently made the transition from dictatorship to democracy, and each character represents a specific group of citizens in such a country - victim, perpetrator and administrator of justice. In placing these characters in the claustrophobic setting of an isolated beach house, Dorfman is able to sensitively explore some of the issues associated with justice and reconciliation in both a personal and political sense.

**Comment [KH1]:** Quick summary of the plot

**Comment [KH2]:** The candidate moves on to outlining the themes that are explored

**Comment [KH3]:** Awareness of cultural context and the overall political message

Each of Dorfman's characters represents a specific group of citizens in a country recently liberated from a dictatorship. Paulina Salas, who was abducted, raped and tortured under the military regime, represents the victims of the dictatorship. Her husband, Gerardo Escobar, is a member of the commission appointed to investigate the crimes perpetrated under the regime, and as such epitomises those who believe that, for the sake of future peace, such crimes must be investigated but not necessarily punished. Roberto Miranda, the man who Paulina accuses of participating in her abduction and torture, represents the perpetrators of crimes under the dictatorship. However, some ambiguity exists as to whether he is actually guilty or if Paulina's accusations are, as he maintains, merely the "fantasies of a diseased mind." The question of Roberto's guilt is central to the dramatic conflict of the play, and as such serves as the basis for many of the questions regarding justice and reconciliation posed by Dorfman.

**Comment [KH4]:** Perhaps a little long – although it does demonstrate a clear understanding of the text

**Comment [KH5]:** Good smooth use of quotation

There are several pieces of evidence which, combined, serve to substantiate Roberto's guilt in the minds of the audience, and thus establish him as a representative of the perpetrators of the dictatorial regime. Firstly, it appears that Paulina, though understandably anxious and traumatized, does not deserve Roberto's label of "madwoman." She shrewdly manipulates her husband by inducing him to supply Roberto with a false confession, suggesting that she is still of sound mind. Though she speaks passionately and with bitterness, she is never incoherent or illogical. On the contrary, she appears to have a rational, perceptive mind. When Gerardo threatens to go to the police, for example, she observes, "I doubt you'd do that. You believe too much in your own powers of persuasion." The audience is consequently inclined to believe Paulina's assertion that she recognises the smell of Roberto's skin and the way that he laughs, along with his use of distinctive phrases such as "teensy weensy." Aspects of Roberto's behaviour could also be interpreted as self-incriminating, a prime example of which is his final confession to Paulina. Paulina claims that he adjusts the flawed confession to reflect the truth and, as Paulina appears neither insane nor delusional, it can only be assumed that her accusations are validated. The confession itself also appears convincing. In phrases such as "the mask of virtue fell off and it, the excitement, it hid, it hid, it hid from me what I was doing," the use of emphatic repetition suggests genuine emotion. However, it must also be remembered that Dorfman leaves unanswered the question of Roberto's guilt. This suggests that the question itself is irrelevant; the confrontation between Paulina and Roberto is representative of that between victim and perpetrator, regardless of the opinion of the individual viewer. It is primarily through the confrontation between these two characters that Dorfman explores some of the issues associated with justice and reconciliation.

**Comment [KH6]:** Lovely, clear opening sentences that outline the point that is to be made in this paragraph

**Comment [KH7]:** Clear point made – Paulina is not mad

**Comment [KH8]:** Detailed use of multiple pieces of evidence (some with smoothly embedded quotations where necessary) to support the claim that Paulina is not mad

**Comment [KH9]:** Clear analysis indicated through the word 'could be interpreted as' which makes it clear that the candidate is exploring the way the audience might perceive the situation

**Comment [KH10]:** Nice concise analysis with clear reference to literary features

**Comment [KH11]:** At the end of the paragraph the candidate moves on to a more interesting issue – we would assume that normally the question of whether or not Roberto is guilty would be a very important one. The fact that it's not suggests that the playwright is trying to get at something deeper (the issues about justice and reconciliation) and that the candidate is aware of this.

**Comment [KH12]:** Beautifully controlled sentence structure with some eloquent but unpretentious vocabulary – e.g. 'incarceration'

**Comment [KH13]:** Detailed and clear analysis here

Even before this confrontation occurs, it is evident that Paulina has neither forgotten her incarceration nor found personal closure through seeking justice or revenge. Her suffering is made apparent by her declaration that "It's, been years since I murmured even a word, I haven't opened my mouth to even whisper a breath of what I'm thinking. Years living in a terror of my own." In portraying Paulina as mentally scarred and constantly afraid, Dorfman is depicting the enduring emotional impact upon the victims of the military regime, and showing that they require some sort of closure in order to resume their normal lives. Her scepticism of the efficacy of Gerardo's commissions,

which has no power to punish those who carried our crimes under the regime, and can only address cases in which the victims died, suggests that she desires a more severe form of retribution against her abductors; an opinion no doubt shared by many of those who suffered under the regime. As she comments to Gerardo, “You hear the relatives of the victims, you denounce the crimes, what happens to the criminals?”

**Comment [KH14]:** Detailed analytical comments started with a key verb like ‘suggests’ – if you are not using verbs like this in your essay then you are not doing much analysis

However, it is only when she imprisons Roberto and is suddenly given the opportunity to exact justice as she seen fit, that she finds herself faced with some truly difficult decisions associated with justice and reconciliation. Do Roberto’s crimes, assuming that he is guilty, warrant the penalty of death? Or should Pauline sacrifice revenge and personal closure for the sake of a safer, more unified future? As Roberto says when pleading for his life:

**Comment [KH15]:** A clear insight into the more interesting issues raised by the text

“So someone did terrible things to you and now you’re doing something terrible to me and tomorrow someone else is going to – on and on and on. I have children, two boys, a girl. Are they supposed to spend the neat fifteen years looking for you until they find you?”

**Comment [KH16]:** Although it is generally better to smoothly include quotations. When you quote large sections of texts, it is correct to set them out in this way

Although this sentiment has its merits, one cannot help but sympathise with Paulina’s predicament. As the gruesome details of her abduction gradually emerge, the audience feels compassion for her and anger on her behalf. Dorfman’s use of coarse, disturbing language in describing her incarceration paints a graphic picture and effectively conveys the horror of the experience. As such, it seems unfair that, after suffering so much, Paulina should have to sacrifice her only chance of exacting justice as she sees fit. In evoking such sympathy for her, Dorfman is showing the flaws in the commission’s plans for leaving the criminal unpunished.

**Comment [KH17]:** Clear awareness of the effect on the audience.

**Comment [KH18]:** Clear analysis with reference to the effect on the audience. Note that the use of literary terms is unpretentious and focused. Simple terms like ‘coarse language’ and ‘graphic picture’ are used successfully and convincingly here.

Gerardo’s attitude towards the conflict between his wife and Roberto reflects the views of the commission. Not having been directly victimised by the regime, he cannot truly understand the extent of Paulina’s suffering saying to her, “How can you possibly be this way, talk this way,” and, “What are you trying to do, woman, with these insane acts?” This apparent lack of empathy and sense of detachment perhaps provides the foundations for his belief that, if the crimes perpetrated under the regime can be explored and established objectively, his country will be able to “close an exceptionally painful chapter - in our history” without the need for further violence. However, thanks to our sympathy for Paulina and thus, indirectly, for the victims of the regime, the audience recognises the flaws in this idea of justice. Difficult questions are raised; for example, if the crimes are buried end the perpetrators left unpunished, what is to prevent future repetition of past atrocities? Nevertheless, Gerardo is convinced that reconciliation is the only way forward for his country and, on a more personal level, his wife. His views thus reflect those of the citizens of an emerging democracy who believe that it is worth forgiving past crimes for the sake of future democratic stability and unity.

**Comment [KH19]:** Clear confident analysis of the effect created by the author

**Comment [KH20]:** Good, smooth use of quotations

**Comment [KH21]:** Again good clear grasp of the audience’s response to the play

Instead of giving a definite resolution to the dramatic conflict between these three characters, Dorfman leaves unanswered the question of Roberto’s fate at the hands of Paulina. This is indicative of his belief that it is the issues explored during the conflict itself that are important, not the outcome. It also suggests that he is not offering any prescriptive answers to the questions he raises, and, in a political context, is in no way taking it upon himself to dictate how an emerging democracy can solve its problems. Towards the end of the play, he uses the dramatic device of “a giant mirror which descends, forcing the members of the audience to look at themselves” to invite the audience to consider what they would do in situations such as those faced by his characters, and to convey that the issues explored in his play can be applied on a personal level by every member

**Comment [KH22]:** Clear closing sentences that reflect the point made in this paragraph

**Comment [KH23]:** The candidate moves towards the conclusion by exploring the subtle literary feature ‘the fact that the questions are left unanswered’ – although there is no simple technical term for this it is a literary feature as real and considerably more powerful than assonance or alliteration.

**Comment [KH24]:** Clear understanding of one of the potential messages of the playwright

**Comment [KH25]:** The candidate remains aware that this is a play, with dramatic effects, and not just a novel

In his powerful and evocative play *Death and the Maiden*, Ariel Dorfman explores some of the issues associated with justice end reconciliation on both a personal and political level His characters face difficult decisions regarding guilt, sacrifice, forgiveness, punishment and peace, all of which have political significance for a new democracy. In depicting both Paulina’s suffering and Gerardo’s desire for future stability, Dorfman is suggesting that there are no easy answers to such questions, and leaves it up to his audience to reflect upon the issues raised.

**Comment [KH26]:** Clear concise summary of the overall thesis of the essay.

**Marks Awarded:**

Selection of Aspect	5	A key theme picked out here and explored with depth and insight. The fact that the issue chosen is of fundamental importance to the play and the fact that the candidate never deviates from this topic helps them to score highly here
Knowledge and Understanding	4	Excellent knowledge of the text. Clear analysis of Dorfman's probably intentions and the likely effects on the audience. Although it would have been a good idea to refer to the fact that Chile, Dorfman's home country, was under the rule of the dictator Piochet.
Presentation	5	Clear structure with all points explored in depth and a sensible, logical progression of ideas
Language	5	Great language – sophisticated and eloquent without being pretentious. Use of literary features is sound, but the student is not trying to hard.
	<b>19</b>	<b>Level 7</b>