
The Relationship Between Character Symbolism and Chilean Society in Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden*

In the play, *Death and the Maiden*, Ariel Dorfman employs symbolism through the characters and their actions to reflect aspects of the corrupt Chilean society that Dorfman himself lived through. Act II, scene i illustrates the symbols quite well, with the troubled, unjust Paulina, the professionalism and tranquility displayed by Gerardo, and the unfortunate situation that Roberto finds himself in. All of these represent different elements of the Chilean society that had long been a dictatorship.

Dorfman uses the character of Paulina to represent relentless power and inexorable control. Dorfman does this by having Paulina play the role of judge or dictator that rules over society. The character of Paulina coincides with the concept that all the power and control rests in the hands of the corrupt government. Dorfman does this by having Paulina perform certain inappropriate or harsh actions to have her way and garner complete control. Paulina is not always exactly unfair, but she always maintains control. For example, she tells Gerardo that she will “give [him] all the time [he] need[s] to speak to [Roberto], in private” (Dorfman 31). Dorfman displays here that Paulina is seemingly being reasonable, but in actuality, her motives might be nothing more than merely trying to seem sane to Gerardo after having been harsh with her words and physically brutal to Roberto. Later, as to display the dominance she has, largely in part due to the possession of her gun, she “puts the gun to [Roberto's] temple” and asks “who are you threatening?” (32). Because Paulina suffered torture and abuse, she feels the need to “put [Roberto] on trial” (34). The “trial” is quite unfair as she constantly treats Roberto with roughness and will only accept a confession - even though it may not be true - but with all the power and decision making capability, no one can oppose her. She even has command over her husband, Gerardo, ordering him to take “the gag off Roberto” and not letting Gerardo release Roberto (31). Like a judge, Paulina has complete control over the decisions being made. Like a dictator, Paulina does not see it necessary to abide by the law, telling Gerardo that if Roberto is genuinely innocent, “then he's really screwed” (42). Dorfman symbolizes the corruption that had resonated in the Chilean government and Chilean society that he had lived in through the harsh and overbearing actions and dialogue of Paulina. Paulina symbolizes power and control over her weaker subjects directly reflecting the imbalance of power in Chilean society.

Dorfman further utilizes character symbolism through the character of Gerardo to represent an element of Chilean government and society of a Chile he lived in for some time in his own life: equity (or at least the longing for it). Dorfman displays the concept of equity in society in the

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character of Gerardo as the lawyer to represent the people, the man that should be depended on to be fair and unbiased. For the most part, Dorfman makes Gerardo out to be a just lawyer who defends the accused and serves on the Commission designed to investigate criminal acts, especially those ending in death. Gerardo treats Roberto the same way, as if he is a regular client, declaring that “even if [Roberto] committed genocide on a daily basis, he has the right to defend himself” (31). This displays a great sense of professionalism and faith that he has for the victims and wrongly accused in the nation. Also, when Paulina begins to use vulgar language with Roberto, Gerardo interjects, saying “My God!” and “she has never spoken like this in her life” (33). Dorfman writes this to show that the character of Gerardo is professional and respectful, and Gerardo tries to maintain the trust or respect that Roberto may have for him. At the end of the scene when Gerardo suggests that they should release Roberto even if he is guilty, Dorfman illustrates that Gerardo realizes his own wife is in the wrong by the way she treats Roberto and should put a stop to the behavior. Nevertheless, this also shows that Gerardo is a little backwards in that he would let Roberto go if he confessed that he tortured Paulina and was truly guilty. Even in Dorfman’s most proper character, however, there is some corruption, but for good reason: to attempt to forget the memories that haunt Paulina. In the best of society, there can still be misconduct, and Dorfman demonstrates that with Gerardo. Overall, Gerardo has his faults and is wishfully thinking, just as the idea of equality and justice for the people is wishful thinking in this society.

Dorfman uses Roberto to represent the concept of impotence. Impotence is recognized in society in all the people that are oppressed and do not have voices. The general population of a corrupt nation like Chile at the time is a prime example of this impotence. Paulina treats Roberto very unfairly throughout the play, just as the government would treat its people as it pleases, and often time quite poorly. For example, Paulina ties him up and allows him to drink water and use the bathroom on her terms only (32-33). Also, like the people living under a hostile government, Roberto has no genuine voice in the “trial” that Paulina puts him on (34). Paulina says she will give “him all the guarantees” he never gave her, but in reality, Paulina mistreats him and Roberto constantly feels threatened (34). In a dictatorship, there is a very real fear of what might happen next. Roberto, quite understandably, feels the same way throughout the play, as he is in the hands of the unstable Paulina who can harm Roberto in any fashion she pleases.

Through the use of the symbolism represented by the characters, Ariel Dorfman personally reflects his view on a corrupt country like Chile. Paulina represents undeniable power that would be seen in a dictator. Gerardo represents justice and impartiality, concepts that would be deeply rooted in a lawyer or some other professional defender of rights. Roberto symbolizes helplessness, which characterizes the people that suffer through a dictatorship on a regular basis. Together, the three characters’ symbols allow for the creation of tension and chaos that ultimately advances the plot in the play. The extreme control and power that Paulina represents

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is placed in the story so that the fairness that Gerardo represents can attempt to balance it out. Of course, the struggle between the two concepts is about the subservience that Roberto represents. When Dorfman writes that the play takes place in a country like Chile that has recently “given itself a democratic government,” but is still suffering from the problems left behind from the old order. Dorfman uses the symbolism of the characters to illustrate this struggle. All in all, Ariel Dorfman uses the characters in *Death and the Maiden* to symbolize different components of Chilean society and government that Dorfman himself witnessed. Paulina represents the unfair, all-powerful ruler over society. Gerardo represents the dwindling integrity left in society in the form of a lawyer that works with the people. Roberto represents the people of the nation that suffers through the dictatorship, forced to submit to the rule of those in charge. *Death and the Maiden* as a whole reflects the strife that Ariel Dorfman experienced in real life Chile.

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