



Death and the Maiden and Its Relevance to Society and Politics

Lim Lang Yan¹, Li Jia^{*2}

¹Shanghai Jincai High School International Division, China
brianlim@163.com

²Shanxi Normal University, Linfen, Shanxi 041099, China
Corresponding author: Li Jia Email: 1146043158@qq.com

ABSTRACT:

This is a textual analysis of *Death and the Maiden* by Ariel Dorfman. The aim of this investigation is to bring universality to the play *Death and the Maiden*. Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* is a play that aims to elicit two main social problems. One being the rise of feminism and the fall of patriarchy. The other being the coexistence between people with different political views. The notion of feminism is brought by the character Paulina's subversion to Latin-American patriarchy. On the other hand, the notion of political split is portrayed by Gerardo and Roberto. Although *Death and the Maiden* is based on the Pinochet regime, these main social problems are not restricted to be a social problem specifically for Chileans. *Death and the Maiden* despite rooted with Chilean history, it is aimed towards every country that faces a political split and a rise in feminism. It is Ariel Dorfman's aim to bring universality to the play. This notion of universality is brought up by the inclusion of feminism because feminism is a prominent modern social problem all around the world. Universality is also brought up by the literary skills used in the play.

Keywords: Death and the Maiden, Society, Politics

Background of Death and the Maiden

The play *Death and the Maiden* is a play that take place after the Pinochet regime. General Augusto Pinochet started a coup against the socialist President, Salvador Allende of Chile in 1973 (Sheehy, 2018). Afterwards, Pinochet dictated the country for 17 years (Long, 2013). Pinochet's regime is infamous for his tortures, executions and mandatory exile (Posner, 2019). The atrocities that violated human rights overshadows his devotion in fixing the country's economy. Pinochet eventually stepped down after the plebiscite voted against him (NDI, 1988). But he continued to play a huge role in Chilean government and is in control of the military after his regime (Rotella, 1998). Due to his control over the military, he maintains control over Chile. He was above Chilean law due to his power.

After the dictatorship of Pinochet, after the tortures and executions, the renewed Chileans face another problem. The problem of fixing the past. With Pinochet still in the government with huge power, his right-wing followers and the people against Pinochet's atrocities became split. When the plebiscite was hosted in 1988 to keep Pinochet on as the leader, the votes were "59.95 percent 'no' and 42.76 percent 'yes'" (NDI, 1988). The result was a near fifty-fifty split between the citizens. This support for Pinochet remains even until present day. In 2013 the CERC conducted a research and found that "9% said he (Pinochet) would go down as one of the greatest leaders in Chilean history" (Long, 2013). Although the Pinochet supporters decreased massively, the 9% supporters are still a lot when considering the atrocities Pinochet committed. These results show that, the power of Pinochet permeates throughout Chile and the society has split opinions in terms of Pinochet's dictatorship.

After Pinochet's regime, in 1990-1991, the Rettig Commission was formed to investigate the human right violations that were committed during Pinochet's rule. However, with Pinochet still in power, the power of the Rettig Commission is limited. For instance, "Rettig Commission could not address victims of human rights violations outside of its mandate, including victims of torture that did not result in death or disappearance" (USIP, 1990). This limit is measured differently by the Chileans. With the country split in supporting Pinochet, the Rettig Commission is a further catalyst to split the country further. There are people who are satisfied with the result of the Rettig Commission's investigation. But some people, "human rights activists, in particular, do not feel the past has been adequately addressed" (Brahm, 2005).

Another social problem that permeates throughout Chilean modern history is feminism. Chile is a Latin American country, "machismo is a Latin American cultural analog to patriarchy" (Kumar, 2014). Women in Chile had been subverting the traditional roles of women and breaking the social norms of patriarchy in Chile. Since the 1970s, women in Chile started to grow in power. This is evident throughout the rule under Pinochet and prior, Allende. The women started protesting against Allende due to food shortage, but later the protest became a condemnation of the left-wing government (Onis, 1971). As the economy of Chile turned to the worse under the rule of Allende, women took matters to their hand and fought for their family's

lives. This feminist movement is also evident during Pinochet's regime. As women's husbands are executed, exiled and confined, women stepped out to fight against the regime. Women "played a key and relevant role in the development of Chilean politics, and they were a crucial determinant in ending human rights violations, and the dictatorship of Pinochet" (Munoz, 1999). Even after Pinochet's rule, when Spain wanted to extradite Pinochet to be tried, Chilean rightist women protested in London against the decision. They "express their gratitude to Pinochet for having ended the shortages and restoring order and tranquility to the country" (Power, 2004). Chilean women are subverting the traditional roles of women. They support their own political parties and they voice themselves to the public. More importantly, they play a major role in Chilean politics.

About the Author

Dorfman is a Chilean-American playwright, journalist, novelist, socialist. He was born in Argentina but fled to USA due to his father's identity as a fleeing Peron soldier (Madigan, 2018). He then fled to Chile due to McCarthy's hunt for communists (Madigan, 2018). He worked with the President of Chile Salvador Allende but went into exile after Pinochet's coup (Madigan, 2018). He stayed in Holland, USA and Paris during his exile (Madigan, 2018). He went back to Chile and stayed between USA and Chile after democracy is restored in Chile. His famous works include *How to Read Donald Duck* and *Death and the Maiden*.



Figure 1:

About *Death and the Maiden*

Dorfman, who lived through the Pinochet regime, who witnessed the rise of feminism in Chile wrote *Death and the Maiden*, of which is inspired by his experience of Chile. Since his exile, he had been contemplating about a "dramatic situation that was someday to become the core of *Death and the Maiden*" (Dorfman, 2000). When he was in exile, he started writing periodical literature to express his view of oppression from dictatorship. Although Dorfman draws inspiration from his own country, like other Latin American writers, he "did not always include readers from their own nations" (McClennen, 2010). He often based his inspiration off of real-life examples and explores the problem in a universal lens. This is also evident in *Death and the Maiden*. Dorfman's audience of *Death and the Maiden* is not limited, it is for "my own Chile or the Argentina where I was born. Or South Africa. Or Hungary. Or China" (Dorfman, 2011). It is for everyone whom faced the task to live with division, the past oppressor or trauma. Other than including elements of Chile after Pinochet's dictatorship, *Death and the Maiden* also includes elements of feminism that is evidently rising in power in Chile. With women representing the role of the fighters against oppression of male, the character Paulina in the play is reflective of the aspect of rising feminism in Chile.

The play *Death and the Maiden* revolves around the personal trial that Paulina wants to enact on Roberto who she recognizes as one of her torturers. While Gerardo, Paulina's husband who is also a member of the Commission (not specifically named as the Rettig Commission) acts as a mediator to try to stop Paulina's trial. The play explores the role of power in justice and women's role in a patriarchal society. Although the author Dorfman does not give an answer to the exploration. He chooses to leave the answer of the exploration to the readers.

¹Figure 1: Taken from Madigan Andrew. (2018). Ariel Dorfman: 'Not to belong anywhere, to be displaced, is not a bad thing for a writer'. The Guardian.

The Characters

The character Paulina's past torture is inspired by the tortures from the Pinochet regime. However, Paulina as said above, is reflective of the rising feminism in not just Chile, but also all around the world. As Dorfman likes to reflect the global issue using a real-life example, Paulina is symbolic of the women rising against the patriarchy globally. Paulina's symbolism is formed by Dorfman's characterization. For instance, when Roberto wakes up and finds out that he is tied up by Paulina, he "looks at her (Paulina) with a terrorized expression in his eyes."² The adjective "terrorized" resembles inferiority in Roberto as a man. He is afraid of Paulina as she now has power over him. This implicitly characterizes Paulina as a character with a force to be reckoned with. Through giving Paulina the power to bring fear to man, Dorfman subverts the power dynamics of the traditional patriarchy in Latin-American country.

However, this image of a powerful woman is not just made for Latino audiences or Chileans, it is for everyone with a background from a traditionally patriarchal country. For instance, when Paulina and Gerardo are arguing about the spare tire. Paulina says "I take care of the house"³. This statement she makes is a common view held by all patriarchal society. Thus, bringing universality to Paulina's characterization. Since Paulina does not bring particular resemblance to a Chilean of Latino. She is just a powerful woman, so she could be related to anyone from any culture.

When put into the context of the Pinochet regime, the character Roberto is characterized in a conflicting way. He could be interpreted as a representative of the Chileans who are strongly against the Pinochet regime. Or, in Paulina's view, one of her torturers who stands with the side of Pinochet. To Paulina, Roberto is her torturer, "the doctor who played Schubert"⁴. Roberto represents the rightist who supports Pinochet and those who should be punished. However, the statement Paulina makes conflicts with the statement that Roberto makes. When Gerardo and Roberto are discussing about the Commission and the political situations, Roberto says "I'm for killing the whole bunch of them (the people who committed crimes for the past government)"⁵. Roberto's statement above characterizes him as a character who has great hatred and anger towards the crimes committed by the past regime. Which resembles the leftist and human right activists of Chile. This conflicting characterization of Roberto represents the split in the society. It makes the readers to wonder about Roberto's side. This conflicting image of Roberto is created so that Dorfman can elicit a question. Dorfman is questioning about the truth. He questions whether the truth is true, whether there is a right answer in solving the split in society. However, he doesn't give any answer to this question. It is his intention to delve into the question with the readers. But it is to the readers to contemplate about their respond.

In the context of Pinochet's regime, the character Gerardo represents the people who is in the middle, who wants reconciliation in the split society. This is shown when Gerardo says "those names are to be kept secret"⁶ and "people can die form an excessive does of the truth"⁷. In the context of Pinochet's regime, the Commission that Gerardo works in is the Rettig Commission. The people who are in the middle is afraid of the further polarization of the society. They are afraid that the supporters of the past regime will clash with the protesters against the past regime. They want to please both sides and bring stability to the society.

Gerardo plays another role as the husband of Paulina. He is the man of the family, the power in a patriarchal society. This is a character who also has intentions to limit Paulina, who is symbolic of feminism. For instance, when Gerardo tries to convince Paulina to let go of Roberto, Gerardo says "Paulina, you're not listening to me"⁸. This characterizes Gerardo as an oppressor of feminism. This sentence acts as a rhetoric as he is trying to assert dominance over Paulina. The verb "listening" connotes Gerardo's request on Paulina's obedience. Thus, reflecting the patriarchy's nature in controlling, oppressing women's power.

The context of these characterization does not serve to limit the characters' symbolism to Chile or Latin-America. This is because, as mentioned above, Dorfman wants to make *Death and the Maiden* relatable to anyone facing a similar problem as Chile. For instance, when Dorfman discusses about the modern global relevance of *Death and the Maiden*, he wrote "its main drama is echoed in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Iran, Nigeria, Sudan, Ivory Coast, Iraq, Thailand, Zimbabwe and now Libya" (Dorfman 2011). So, the context serves to bring more universality and make it relatable to anyone who is facing a similar problem as Chile. The context of Chile is a synecdoche to the whole world. Thus, the symbolism of the characters is a synecdoche to the different point of views of the world.

² Taken from *Death and the Maiden* P. 19. Happens when Roberto wakes up and finds himself tied up to the chair by Paulina.

³ Taken from *Death and the Maiden* P. 4. Happens when Paulina is arguing about whether she should've fixed the spare tire or not. She is arguing that she only takes care of domestic matters, while her husband fix and repair.

⁴ Taken from *Death and the Maiden* P. 22. Happens when Gerardo is asking Paulina why did she kidnap Roberto.

⁵ Taken from *Death and the Maiden*, published by Penguin Plays, 1994 edition, P. 16. Happens when Roberto and Gerardo are exchanging political views.

⁶ Taken from *Death and the Maiden*, published by Penguin Plays, 1994 edition, P. 15. Happens when Roberto and Gerardo are exchanging political views.

⁷ Taken from *Death and the Maiden*, published by Penguin Plays, 1994 edition, P. 55. Happens when Gerardo and Paulina are arguing about Gerardo having sex with another woman while Paulina is imprisoned and tortured.

⁸ Taken from *Death and the Maiden*, published by Penguin Plays, 1994 edition, P. 42. Happens when Gerardo is trying to convince Paulina to let go of Roberto.

The Language

The language used by Dorfman also supports this universality. For instance, when Gerardo and Paulina are arguing about their political view. Gerardo says “but all of the rest of the country will see why”⁹. By using a concrete diction of “country”, Dorfman makes the setting of the play ambiguous. This “country” could be any country in the world. It is not stated explicitly that it is Chile, so it becomes relatable to people of any country. Furthermore, instead of saying Rettig Commission, Dorfman refers to the commission that Gerardo work for as “Commission”¹⁰. The inexplicit diction of “Commission” brings connotation that this can be a Commission of any country. It is not specifically the Rettig Commission of Chile. So, the word choice of Dorfman helps to bring universality to *Death and the Maiden*. These inexplicit dictions also help to make the play sound like a fantasy. It helps to pull the play away from its context while retaining the essence of the context. Thus, the fantasy of the language brings universality to the play.

Dorfman also brings universality through actively forcing the audiences of the play to “confront our own complicity” (Luban, 1998) in the society. For instance, in the end of Act three scene one. A giant mirror “descends, forcing members of the audience to look at themselves”¹¹. The giant mirror acts as a way in which Dorfman breaks the fourth wall. He “forces” the audience to reflect the questions he asked in the play by using the mirror’s reflection. By forcing the audience to interact in the play, more audiences of any ethnicity can all contemplate about their respond. As result, bringing universality by enacting the play to different audiences in different countries.

Conclusion

Although *Death and the Maiden* was written under the background of Chile’s past dictatorship, it asks the universal question of people’s role in society. It questions the social dynamics after a horrible political event. However, this event is not restrained to be specifically Pinochet’s regime. It could be for any part of the world that is facing a political split. Furthermore, its relation with feminism increases the play’s relation to modern day politics and the protesting society. Thus, the play is a question that mirror’s society and politics.

⁹Taken from *Death and the Maiden*, published by Penguin Plays, 1994 edition, P. 36. Happens when Paulina and Gerardo are arguing about their political views.

¹⁰Taken from *Death and the Maiden*, published by Penguin Plays, 1994 edition, P. 36. Happens when Paulina and Gerardo are arguing about their political views.

¹¹ Taken from *Death and the Maiden*, published by Penguin Plays, 1994 edition, P. 66. Happens in the end of Act III scene 1 after Paulina’s catharsis.

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