Ariel Dorfman's *Death and the Maiden* is a moral thriller about a woman, Paulina, who believes that a stranger who comes to her home is the doctor who, under a military dictatorship, tortured and raped her many years before. (The play's title is taken from a piece of music by Franz Schubert; Paulina loved the piece but grew to revile it when it was played repeatedly during her torture sessions.)

Dorfman began writing the play in the mid-1980s, when he was in exile from Chile, a country under the rule of the military dictator General Augusto Pinochet. It was not until Chile's return to democracy in 1990 that Dorfman returned to the play and "understood ... how the story had to be told."
ACT ONE
When the play opens, "The time is the present and the place, a country that is probably Chile but could be any country that has given itself a democratic government just after a long period of dictatorship." At the Escobars' secluded beach house it is late at night and an uneaten dinner is laid out on the table. Paulina sits on the terrace, startled by the sound of an unfamiliar car motor. She takes a gun from the sideboard, and stands listening as her husband, Gerardo, speaks to the driver of the car and then enters the house. Paulina is disturbed by the unusual occurrence, and Gerardo explains that he had a flat tire on the way home and accepted a ride from a passing motorist. He blames Paulina for the spare tire being flat and for the jack being gone (Paulina lent it to her mother). The couple argue about these details and then discuss Gerardo's meeting with the country's president, from which he has just returned.

Gerardo has been named to a commission examining human rights abuses under the country's previous government, a military dictatorship. (It is revealed through dialogue that Paulina was arrested and tortured while attending medical school during this dictatorship.) Paulina has mixed feelings; she is suspicious of the commission, which is only to investigate cases of abuse that ended in death. A case like Paulina's own abduction, therefore, would not fall within the commission's jurisdiction. Paulina is still traumatized by the memory of being raped and tortured, but she has never discussed details of her experience with her mother or other people close to her.

Gerardo agrees with Paulina that the power of the commission is limited, but he believes nevertheless that "there is so much we can do..." Gerardo makes a point of appearing to ask for Paulina's permission to sit on the commission, but the first scene ends with his admission that he has already accepted the president's appointment. An hour later, a knock at the door rouses the Escobars. Gerardo is ill at ease until he opens the door to admit Doctor Roberto Miranda, the man who earlier drove him home. Miranda apologizes for the intrusion, and as the two men speak, Paulina edges closer, listening in on their conversation. As she listens, the sound of Miranda's voice appears to greatly upset her. Miranda explains that he heard a news story about the commission on the radio, only then realizing who Gerardo was, and felt he had to return to congratulate him on the appointment. Miranda appears very enthusiastic about the commission, although he also realizes that the investigations are unlikely to conclude with punishment. Miranda prepares to leave, promising to pick Gerardo up the next morning and help him retrieve his car, but Gerardo insists that Miranda stay the night.

The third scene is a brief interlude a short time later, in which Paulina is seen dragging Miranda's unconscious body into the room and tying him to a chair. She gags him with her own underwear, then takes his car keys and leaves. When dawn rises on the fourth scene, Paulina has returned and sits with her gun, watching Miranda. When he awakens, she speaks to him for a long while, playing a cassette of Schubert's quartet *Death and the Maiden* which she found in Miranda's car. This music has painful associations for Paulina; it was played while she was in captivity, and Paulina takes Miranda's cassette—along with the familiarity of his voice—as proof that he is the doctor who tortured her. Gerardo enters, aghast at the scene he finds. Paulina explains her discovery, and Gerardo's first conclusion is: "You're sick." Gerardo makes a move to untie Miranda, and Paulina fires the gun wildly. She explains that she has already called a mechanic, and when the latter arrives, she ushers Gerardo out of the house to retrieve their car. The act ends with Paulina's cool statement, "We're going to put him on trial, Gerardo, this doctor. Right here, today."
ACT TWO
The time is midday; Miranda is still tied and Paulina speaks to him intimately about her captivity and the night of her release. Gerardo enters after retrieving the car, with a new resolve to talk his wife into releasing Miranda. Gerardo appeals to an ideal of law, implying Paulina is no better than the military regime if she will not allow Miranda to defend himself. Paulina says she has every intention of allowing the doctor to argue his case. She was only waiting for Gerardo's return, having decided that her husband will act as a lawyer for the accused. When Paulina removes his gag, Miranda claims never to have seen Paulina before, calling her "extremely ill, almost prototypically schizoid."

Gerardo continues to plead with his wife, and as they argue it becomes evident that Gerardo has difficulty speaking about Paulina's experience. If she can prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that Miranda is the same doctor, Paulina asks, would Gerardo still want her to set him free. Gerardo replies, "If he's guilty, more reason to set him free ... Imagine what would happen if everyone acted like you did." Gerardo argues that if Miranda is guilty of the crimes, they should turn him over to the proper authorities. His wife, however, believes that while the new government calls itself a democracy, many of the same men who were part of the dictatorship are still active in the government. Not only does she contend that the authorities would immediately release Miranda, she states her belief that the doctor is part of the current government and that his encounter with Gerardo was no coincidence.

Paulina explains that at one point she wanted retribution from Miranda but says that now she merely wants him to confess and she will let him go. "What can he confess if he's innocent?" wonders Gerardo. The scene ends on Paulina's reply, "If he's innocent? Then he's really screwed."

The second scene is at lunch. Paulina watches from the terrace as Gerardo feeds Miranda and the two men talk. Gerardo stresses that a confession, even a false one, is Miranda's only hope of escaping unharmed, while Miranda emphasizes that he is only in his current situation because he stopped to pick up Gerardo and how depends on the lawyer to get him out of this mess. After another threatening appearance by Paulina, Miranda accuses Gerardo of not being as impartial as he has claimed to be: "She plays the bad guy and you play the good guy ... to see if you can get me to confess that way." The two men argue but eventually admit they are both scared, and the act ends with Miranda asking Gerardo's help in fabricating a convincing confession for Paulina.
ACT THREE
The final act opens just before evening. Miranda is still bound, and Gerardo, with a tape recorder on his lap, pleads with Paulina to tell him the details of her abduction before he has to hear them from Miranda. Paulina reminds him that she had attempted to tell him these details before, just after she was released, when they were interrupted by the woman with whom Gerardo was involved during Paulina's absence. This memory is a severe blow to Gerardo, and he eventually persuades Paulina to speak instead of her abduction. When she gets to the point in her story of first meeting the doctor and hearing Schubert in the darkness, the lights fade and her voice overlaps with that of Miranda. The lights come up to reveal Miranda making his confession into the tape recorder. He claims that the music was an attempt to alleviate the suffering of the prisoners. He describes how a "brutalization took over my life," and he began to enjoy the torture with a detached curiosity "partly morbid, partly scientific."

The confession over, Paulina sends Gerardo to retrieve Miranda's car. After his departure, however, she changes her tone, saying she was entirely convinced by the doctor's confession and now "could not live in peace with myself and let you live." She informs him that she inserted small errors in her own taped account, which Miranda apparently corrected of his own accord; now Paulina says she will kill him "because you haven't repented at all." On Paulina's unanswered question, "What do we lose by killing one of them?" the action freezes and the lights go down on the scene.

A giant mirror descends in front of the characters, "forcing," as the stage directions state, "the members of the audience to look at themselves." The lights come up on the final scene of the play, in a concert hall several months later. Gerardo and Paulina enter, elegantly dressed, and sit down facing the mirror. When the music ends they rise as if at intermission, and Gerardo speaks to a number of well-wishers who have gathered around him. Paulina observes Miranda entering ("or he could be an illusion," the directions read). The three characters are seated as the performance recommences, and Schubert's "Death and the Maiden" is heard. Paulina and Miranda lock eyes for a moment, then she looks ahead into the mirror as the music plays.

The title 'Death and the Maiden'
The title of Dorfman's play comes from the quartet by Schubert which Paulina associates with her abduction and torture. She finds a cassette of this music in Miranda's car. The piece, String Quartet No. 14 in D minor (D. 810), takes the name "Death and the Maiden" from a Schubert song. The theme is common in folk music such as the English song "Death and the Lady," in which a rich lady who has failed to bribe Death into granting her a few more years of life sings of having been betrayed by him. The theme of the song is reflected in the characters themselves, with the shadowy doctor who existing as a kind of Death figure in Pauline’s memory. However, Dorfman's play presents a reversal on the theme—if the audience agrees that Paulina has found the right doctor, that is—for in the present circumstance it is the Maiden (Paulina) who holds the power of life over Death (Miranda).
Political context

Ariel Dorfman carefully specifies in his stage directions that *Death and the Maiden* is set in "a country that is probably Chile but could be any country that has given itself a democratic government just after a long period of dictatorship." There is both a specificity and a universality to the play, as many critics have noted, making it extremely topical in the late-twentieth century era of tentative political transformation. Frank Rich of the *New York Times*, for example, called the play a "mousetrap designed to catch the conscience of an international audience at a historic moment when many more nations than Chile are moving from totalitarian terror to fragile freedom."

Among the many Latin American countries which in recent decades have similarly experienced periods of military rule (Guatemala, Brazil, Bolivia), Argentina and Chile are often compared to one another because of their shared history and close geographical proximity in the "Southern Cone" of South America. Both Chile, following Augusto Pinochet's military coup, and Argentina, in the years of the military's "Dirty War," were characterized by civil repression, extra-judicial abductions and "disappearances," torture, and murder. Familiarity with the modern history of these two countries provides a good basis of understanding for the context of *Death and the Maiden*.

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century in Chile, the political climate swung often between right and left with no government strong enough to effect large scale change. Infrastructure developed slowly and rural poverty became an increasing problem, along with rapid urbanization as desperate populations flooded the city. Some social reforms were achieved in the 1960s, but Chile's politics became increasingly polarized and militant Salvador Allende crept to presidential victory in 1970 with a leftist coalition of socialists, communists, and extremists. Allende's sweeping economic reforms included the state takeover of many private enterprises; the United States was angered by the confiscation of U.S.-controlled copper mines and Chile's openly friendly relationship with Cuba, a country with whom America had ceased diplomatic and economic ties.

The Chilean military, in a coup orchestrated by General Augusto Pinochet, seized power on September 11, 1973, using air force jets to bomb the presidential palace. (U.S. support of the coup through the Central Intelligence Agency [CIA] has been documented.) Allende died, apparently a suicide, and thousands of his supporters were killed. Pinochet, at the head of a four-man ruling junta (a group or council that controls a government), dissolved Chile's congress and repressed—often violently—political opposition. His government maintained power for the next decade and a half, frequently resorting to terror (including the abduction/tortures to which Paulina was subjected) in order to suppress dissent.

A peaceful transfer of presidential power was achieved in 1990 but considerable tension continued between the military and the government concerning the human rights violations of the Pinochet era. Under a constitution written during his regime, Pinochet himself remained army commander until stepping down in March, 1998. Yet after that time he still retained congressional influence with the title of senator for life. Chilean
society continues to struggle with the violent legacy of its past, although current president Eduardo Frei has sped the process of reconciliation by accelerating human rights tribunals and inquiries into Chile's "disappeared" (through commissions like the one to which Gerardo has been appointed in *Death and the Maiden*).

Chile's neighbor, Argentina, has likewise seen frequent suppression of democratic processes. The country experienced its first coup in 1930, the government falling to a coalition of military officers and civilian aristocrats who established a semi-fascist state following the growing trend of fascism in Europe. The military undertook a more forceful coup in 1943, one which set out to restructure Argentine culture totally. The goal this time was not the mere suppression of political radicals but the complete eradication of civilian politics. There were to be five more coups between 1943 and 1976, the year in which the military initiated the brutality known as the Dirty War. During this period, Argentina's most influential ruler was Colonel Juan Perón, first elected to the presidency in 1946.

Perón was different from his military predecessors in that he sought to integrate the urban working class into his party, although his government retained a strong hand on more hard-line radicalism. Perón's partner in everything during the early years of his presidency was his mistress, later his wife, Eva Duarte—known popularly as Evita (composer Andrew Lloyd Weber and lyricist Tim Rice would immortalize her in their 1978 musical *Evita*). She had cunning political instinct, upon which Perón grew to rely. When the military threw Perón over in 1955, many of the social changes he and Evita had initiated remained in place. The legacy of Evita (she died of cancer in 1952), combined with the knowledge that Perón was alive in exile, empowered many to adhere to Peronist ideals, despite the military's attempts to suppress them. Perón was resurrected in 1973 as the economic situation in Argentina continued to worsen, and the public, looking for some positive way out of the military regimes, enthusiastically welcomed his return; he died a mere eight months into his new term as president.

A coup on March 24, 1976, overthrew Perón's widow Isabel, president since his death, and a military junta composed of the three commanders in chief of the armed forces installed itself as the government. In the years between the coup and the resumption of democratic elections in 1983, the military fought a vicious and covert war against the people of Argentina, totally restructuring society to eradicate any political consciousness. A system of clandestine concentration camps, numbering over three hundred at their peak, provided the center of an all-out policy of abduction, torture, murder, and disposal. Estimates of the dead run as high as thirty thousand, and the lives of the survivors were left destroyed in other ways. As in Chile, following a tenuous return to democracy Argentine society at large continues to struggle with the issue of how to rectify the violence of the past. Activists such as Las Madres de Plaza de Mayo (who daringly initiated protests against the military government while it was still in power) maintain pressure on the current government to investigate human rights abuses, although punishment for many of the perpetrators remains unlikely.
The Chilean National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation

> The violence precipitating the creation of the Commission

In 1973 General Augusto Pinochet overthrew President Allende in a coup d’etat. The coup and its aftermath were extremely violent with Pinochet’s forces responsible for 1,200 deaths or disappearances in the first 3 months. Censorship was imposed, all political opposition barred and the Congress was dissolved. For the next four years Pinochet’s government, led by the intelligence service DINA and then CNI, harshly prevented any and all opposition, through the use of harassment, torture, killings, disappearances and exile. In 1978 the Pinochet government passed an amnesty law barring all prosecution of those who committed human rights abuses from the time of the coup through early that year, which was the time of the worst abuses. In 1980 several opposition groups formed an armed resistance. Government violence thereafter was justified in the name of fighting against these groups. In response to growing domestic and international pressure, in 1988, confident of the support of the Chilean people, Pinochet agreed that a plebiscite could be held allowing the population to vote on his continued rule. A strong “No” vote led to a general election in 1989. Patricio Aylwin won the election and took office in 1990. However, Pinochet was to remain Commander-in-Chief of the Army through 1997. Moreover, most of the judiciary had been selected by Pinochet, and the Senate was dominated by military supporters.

> The mandate and work of the Commission

Soon after assuming office Aylwin created the National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation (also known as the Rettig Commission), and appointed nine members. The membership was evenly divided politically between Pinochet supporters and opponents. They were given four central tasks--1. To provide an overview of how the repressive system worked. 2. To account for every person who died or disappeared between September 1973 and March 1990. 3. To propose measures of reparations. 4. To propose measures of prevention. The Rettig Commission was given nine months to complete its investigations and write a report. It did not have subpoena powers or the ability to compel testimony. It was also explicitly stated in the document creating the commission that it did not have any judiciary powers, but was purely an information-gathering instrument. One result of this limitation is that the report does not name the names of those responsible for the crimes that it describes. Thus no new information about those responsible for the past crimes was made available by the Commission’s work. All information uncovered by the Rettig Commission was handed over to the courts. The Chilean Commission had more than 60 staff
members, and hired six social workers to address the needs of victims and their families. The Commission received testimony from over 4,000 complainants as well as a few members of the military who came forward voluntarily. The Commission also used information provided by Chilean Human Rights groups and the Catholic Church. The Commission was overtly concerned with meeting the needs of the victims of state violence. The Commissioners took the responsibility of taking testimony very seriously, and considered it a critical part of helping victims reclaim their faith in the State. Victims were politely ushered into state offices, previously the site of violence and fear, and offered coffee. A Chilean flag lay on the desk. Testifiers’ stories were listened to with respect and sympathy. Testifiers were permitted to tell the story in whatever form they wished, and they were not cross-examined. The Commission uncovered very little new information about the fate of the disappeared. This failure was due both to the fact that it was not given access to military records and because it did not have any ability to compel evidence from members of the military. Another significant limitation of the Commissions work was that it only addressed human rights violations resulting in death. Thus while the Commission’s report details the cases of 2,115 individuals killed by government forces and 164 victims of left-wing violence, and names each victim, it does not provide any information about the estimated 200,000 victims of gross human rights violations. Nor were these individuals given the opportunity to provide testimony to the Commission. The report also provides a general overview of the violence during the Pinochet regime, as well as outline in painful detail the ways that torture was used and the methods employed.

> The Impact of Commission’s work

In presenting the Commission’s report to the nation, President Alywin apologized to the victims and their families on behalf of the state. He also sent a letter to each family apologizing for the crimes of the past, along with a copy of the Commission’s report. Interestingly, while the various wings of the military condemned the report as an attempt to destabilize the state, no one directly denied the information contained within. The information in the report was so meticulously documented that it was impossible to completely deny its veracity. The Rettig Commission report calls for a significant reparations policy, including legal and administrative assistance, financial support for education, medical care and psychological services, and symbolic reparations to vindicate the victims such as public monuments or parks. A law promulgated in 1992 provided significant financial support to the family of all victims named in the report. A fund has also been created for children of the disappeared to support their continuing education. The Ministry of Health also established teams in cities around the country offering general medical and mental health care to victim’s families. Unlike the other forms of reparations these medical and mental health services are available to victims of gross human rights violations and families of
the disappeared alike. The Commission report was welcomed by human rights organizations and the public. However, three assassinations by leftist groups in the three weeks following the release of the report shifted the focus of public discussion to debate of violence by the left, thereby effectively ending public discussion about the report and its findings. Tens of thousands of copies of the report were held back from circulation to avoid political violence. Families of the disappeared have continued to bring those responsible for the death of their family members to justice. Despite the 1978 Amnesty law several military officers have been held responsible for their role in the past regime, and a few have actually gone to jail. In 1999 five Senior Military Officers were brought to trial because of their role in the disappearance, and probable death, of 75 political prisoners. The judges ruled that because the deaths of several of these 75 individuals had not been certified, the violence could be considered on-going, and that as a result the Amnesty Law offered no protection.