

# Symbolism in plays: comparison of dorffman and dürrenmatt



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The usage of allegorical references and symbolism is essential when delivering the playwrights intended messages to the audience. The author of *Death and the Maiden*, Ariel Dorfman, and the author of *The Visit*, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, both convey messages which regard human society through the use of symbols. By creating characters that represent social issues such as anti-religion, patriarchal values, and loss of ethics, both writers utilize the outcomes of characters to deliver their opinions. Furthermore, both plays emphasize social issues, elicit causes, and imply solutions to the issues addressed by utilizing allegorical references. In *Death and the Maiden*, Dorfman addresses the situation of his home country, Chile, while in *The Visit*, Dürrenmatt uses biblical allusions.

Both plays, *The Visit* and *Death and the Maiden* make use of allegories to convey a message. Dürrenmatt uses symbols to construct a biblical allusion in *The Visit* and deliver his message; that greed holds the ability to decay moral values and that money has the power to assume personalities. The allusion is made up of Ill, the Christ figure, who must sacrifice himself for the betterment of Guellen, which is “rotting to death” (Dürrenmatt 12). The desperate nature of the town is obvious through the excitement caused by the arrival of Claire Zachanassian. Since her wealth is well-known, it immediately sheds hope upon Guellen that she will come to save the town from its poverty. Ironically, she does the exact opposite. Claire, the satanic figure, introduces temptation, which slowly diminishes the moral values the town is so much known to uphold. By offering the million dollars in return for Ill’s death, the power of greed is executed through the transformation of Guellens citizens. At first, the mayor states that he “reject[s] [Claire’s] offer”

in “ the name of humanity” and that he would rather live through poverty than have “ blood on [his] hands” (39). The mayor’s tone is extremely certain, emphasizing to what extent his transformation really is. By the end of the play, the mayor has already fooled himself into thinking that by killing Ill it would be better for humanity. For the sacrifice of one, it would “ save” the town. Temptation has led Guellen to believe that their decision to kill Ill was not derived through the money, but through the “ matter of justice” (91). This moral decline portrays through the use of the biblical allusion, which Dürrenmatt creates for one specific purpose; to deliver a caveat towards greed. The paradox of greed, in this case, derives from Claire. In one aspect, she saves Guellen from poverty, hunger, and imminent destruction. Yet, she introduces greed and murder, which subsequently leads to the loss of ethics and gain of antireligious values. Indeed, she saves the town in one way, but destroys the town in another.

In the play *Death and the Maiden*, Ariel Dorfman creates an allegory portraying the cruel government of Chile and the struggles to transition away from it into a new leadership. The characters of the play are symbols to portray these struggles to heal. Additionally, the personalities of these characters portray the necessities of people after such an event; such as justice, revenge, and acceptance. Although the old regime is out of order, the effects of the crimes against human rights are not so easily forgotten. After being brutally tortured and raped, Paulina Salas struggles in her life. She finds it easy to suppress her memories, but never finds a way to accept the past. Hence, Paulina is a symbol of revenge, which Dorfman creates to emphasize the struggle to heal. When Doctor Miranda, her alleged rapist,

arrives to her house, she recognizes his voice, which “ during all these years not an hour has passed that [she hasn’t] heard it” (Dorfman 22), proving her inability to accept the past, and describing her personality as vengeful. Her ability to recall the Doctor’s voice from years in the past portrays the extent to which the memories of her past still affect her present. When the Doctor wakes up after spending the night, he sees Paulina, who is holding a gun and “[pointing] it playfully in his direction” (20). Knowing her thoughts, her intentions are made clear. She wants him to feel sorry and repent, yet claims it is not “ vengeance” (34) which drives her. Through Paulina, Dorfman uses her inability to forget as an example of social issues which pertain to Chile. By portraying her as a woman who has been affected by events directly linked to a cruel government, he represents all women in Chile’s reality, who have suffered through the old regime. Moreover, by making her personality vengeful, he directly implies that many women in Chile are also seeking closure through revenge. When Dorfman ends his play with mirrors dropping down, he implies that the plot directs towards the audience, and is suppose to catalyze self exploration amongst them.

Dorfman also creates Gerardo Escobar as a lawyer who has been appointed to a commission that will examine human rights abuses during the past dictatorship. This career is ironic because of his wife; who has had her rights abused, but seeks justice not through her husband, but through revenge. Both of Escobar’s occupations, as a lawyer and a member of the commission, serve as support for the idea that he is a symbol of justice. Dorfman creates this dichotomy of roles to show the different way people deal with the struggle. The way Paulina does; through revenge, which is seeking justice

with an evil intention, or the way Escobar does; through justice and acceptance. Escobar constantly states that these crimes were held “ fifteen years ago” (36), and to “ put him on trial” (34) instead of seek revenge the way Paulina does, proving that Escobar has accepted what has happened and holds no grudge. Although Paulina retorts that crimes had not been directly done towards him, indeed, they had. Escobar is directly affected because though he had not been abused, his wife had, giving him a link. Dorfman uses Escobar as a symbol to portray the way people should handle violations of human rights, with acceptance. To prove this method correct, Dorfman then uses Paulina as a symbol for revenge to show that if people cannot come to terms with the past, they will constantly seek revenge, never find peace, and consequently struggle to heal.

Both authors, Dürrenmatt and Dorfman, utilize symbolism and allegories to deliver their own messages about their views on society. Dürrenmatt believes that if humanity succumbs to temptation, moral decline is unavoidable. He demonstrates the serious nature of this warning by implementing the idea into a biblical allusion. This allusion portrays that death and anti-religion follows greed. Dorfman similarly conveys a message through an allusion of his home country Chile. By portraying a women’s struggle to overcome her cruel past and making her symbolize revenge, Dorfman demonstrates the flaws of such an approach. He shows that if revenge is what you seek, a person can never find closure, and that the only way one can obtain peace is through acceptance and mercy.

**Work Cited**

Dorfman, Ariel. *Death and the Maiden*. New York: Penguin Books, 1991.

Durrenmatt, Friedrich. *The Visit*. Trans. Patrick Bowles. New York: Grove Press, 1956.