Ariel Dorfman’s use of dramatic elements to reveal and emphasise the contradictions within Paulina’s methods.
Question: How was your understanding of cultural and contextual considerations of the work developed through the interactive oral?

In the Interactive Oral, a number of ideas were discussed about Ariel Dorfman’s “Death and the Maiden”. The idea of justice being explored in his play intrigued me because from each of characters’ viewpoint, justice is seen differently, however Paulina’s view of justice fascinated me the most because she actively pursues justice.

I learnt that Dorfman wrote the play being inspired by events which occurred during and after the period of dictatorship Chile was experiencing. During the dictatorship of Chile, it appears that many people were abducted and tortured for information about any threats against the dictatorship. The ranges of torture methods were very extensive and brutal, and this left significant emotional impacts on me. These impacts helped me to further sympathise with Paulina’s character, resulting in my furthered understanding towards the reasons why Paulina would take actions which I initially thought were extreme lengths to attain justice.

However, Paulina’s resolve is questioned through the perspective of Gerardo. From Gerardo’s viewpoint, Paulina’s methods seem morally wrong. Gerardo’s job shows strong links with the National Commission, which in 1990s Chile after the end of its dictatorship, dealt with the disappearances and deaths of the people who were tortured or went missing. Initially, Gerardo is quite proud of his job and finds it relatively straightforward to deal with however; he cannot decide whether he should trust his wife’s judgement or the doctor’s innocence. This conflict is clearly reflected off what was happening between the newly formed democratic government and the citizens of Chile. Like Gerardo, the National Commission initially sounded like a good idea to the democratic government however; they only investigated the deaths and disappearances of the citizens and did not investigate those who were tortured but still lived at the time, which sparked intense and long term conflict between the victims and the democratic government. So through my developed understanding of the problems Gerardo faced, I was able to develop my understanding of the problems that the Chilean democratic government similarly faced.

Altogether, the contextual elements surrounding the play helped me to further my understanding towards the problems that each of the three characters faced, as well as their changing feelings throughout the play and the reasons behind their actions. Counter-wise, the thorough discussion of the play and the representations of each of the three characters helped me to understand the real life problems which Chile was faced with.
Inspired by Chile’s period under Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship, Ariel Dorfman’s 1991 play, *Death and the Maiden*, focuses on three characters – Paulina Salas, Gerardo Escobar and Dr Roberto Miranda – and how they confront the unresolved issues facing them when their nation transitions from a dictatorship into a democracy. When Paulina’s husband, Gerardo, introduces Roberto to her one day, she believes him to be the assailant who tortured her during the control, thus driving her to bring justice to her torturer. However, her intense desire to bring justice influences her to take malicious and immoral actions instead. The portrayal of these contradictions allows Dorfman to achieve his purpose: encouraging his audiences to re-evaluate the morality of their approaches towards resolving conflict. So in order to reveal and emphasise the contradictions within Paulina’s methods, the playwright relies upon the use of dramatic elements. Specifically, these elements include music, the prop cassette recorder, the prop gun and the ‘giant descending mirror’.

The employment of music is one of the ways in which the playwright reveals and accentuates the incongruities in Paulina’s actions. In Act One, Scene Four, Roberto wakes up and finds himself tied up and injured, with “[Paulina] sitting in front of him with her gun” (Dorfman, 1991) saying:

“…what if we listen to some Schubert while I make breakfast, a nice breakfast, Doctor? *Death and the Maiden?*” (Dorfman, 1991)

The use of inclusive language and diction within the words ‘we’ and ‘nice’ allow the playwright to construct Paulina’s tone as warm and inviting – reinforced by her voluntary offer of ‘making breakfast’. However, verbal irony contrasts against her friendly presence, as her reference to Schubert’s musical composition, *Death and the Maiden*, rather foreshadows her intentions to ‘enact revenge’ and further harm to Roberto, whom previous played this piece whilst torturing her. Additionally, contradictions are further revealed through the playwright’s use of situational irony depicting “[Paulina] sitting in front of [Roberto] with her gun”, which establishes the likelihood that Paulina manipulated the current situation as is, however her feigning of ignorance conveyed through
Dorfman’s use of warm and inviting tone in Paulina’s dialogue indicates otherwise. Thus the contrast between her friendliness and voluntary offers against her malicious intentions and actions exposes these contradictions. These contradictions are further emphasised through the exploit of the audiences’ visual and aural senses. Visually, the utilisation of stage directions explicitly depicting a beaten and tied up Roberto “rolling over and desperately trying to free himself” (Dorfman, 1991), alongside the employment of dim lighting to establish a scene set “Before Dawn” creates a dark atmosphere. The melancholic tones prominent in Schubert’s *Death and the Maiden*, which are played during the scene intensifies the dark atmosphere, thus further articulating the conflicts in Paulina’s method through the exploitation of the audiences’ visual and aural senses. This exploitation subsequently triggers a visceral reaction and emotional response of fear and shock within the audience members towards Paulina’s abrupt change in character from ‘victim’ to ‘torturer’. Altogether, the dramatic and literary elements aforementioned reveals and emphasises upon the contradictions in Paulina’s method.

In addition to music, Dorfman manipulates the prop of the cassette recorder to underline conflicts within Paulina’s attempts to bring justice. Originally, Paulina uses the instrument to record Roberto’s confession to performing torture, which would then be used in his trial that Paulina intends to put him on. Despite her intentions, Paulina coerces Roberto to confess on tape:

[Paulina] First write there that this is all done of your own free will, without any sort of pressure whatsoever.

[Roberto] That’s not true.

[Paulina] You want real pressure, Doctor?” (Dorfman, 1991)

In this exchange of dialogue, Dorfman reveals the contradiction in Paulina’s method by undermining the purpose of the cassette recorder – to record genuine confessions – with her intimidation and coercing of Roberto. The rhetorical question imposed in Paulina’s line “You want real pressure, Doctor?” articulates the conflicts in her approaches as inclusion of the word ‘real’,
highlight her potential to intensify her malice. Furthermore, Dorfman’s portrayal of Paulina playing the confession repeatedly after it had been taken symbolises the cassette recorder as a means for Paulina to move past her issue. In spite of that, the playwright’s foreshadowing and portrayal of Paulina’s erratic behaviour reduces the probability that the cassette recorder will actually help her, thus revealing another contradiction in her method. In addition, the audience’s established response of fear and shock towards her sudden change in character is facilitated through the heightening of dramatic tension, provided by Dorfman’s inclusion of “[the] moment’s silence” (Dorfman, 1991). Collectively, the exploitation of the prop cassette recorder and the aforesaid literary and dramatic techniques allows Dorfman to underline and articulate the conflicts within Paulina’s resolve.

Another way in which the playwright exposes and emphasises the contradictions within Paulina’s resolve is through the employment of the prop gun. In the penultimate scene, Paulina, unsatisfied with Roberto’s repentance, threatens him with the gun in order to make him wholeheartedly confess his sins:

“This time I am going to think about myself, about what I need. If only to do justice in one case, just once. What do we lose? What do we lose by killing one of them? What do we lose? What do we lose?” (Dorfman, 1991)

Initially, the playwright symbolises the gun as a symbol of defence within his stage directions by portraying Paulina “go[ing] to the sideboard, [and] tak[ing] out a gun” (Dorfman, 1991) for defence against what she thought was a stranger entering her house. However, in the penultimate scene, Dorfman inverts the purpose of the gun from a symbol of defence into a symbol of weaponry, exhibiting the contradiction in her behaviour. The contrast between her intent “to do justice in one case”, against her displayed actions of aggression further strengthens the portrayal of her conflicts in her actions. The playwright’s use of pronoun ‘them’ in Paulina’s dialogue alienates Roberto as ‘one of them’, which in turn, articulates her perception of Roberto’s life insignificant. This subsequently conveys the contradictions in her resolve as Paulina’s perception highlights her obsession over
revenge and her inability to think rationally. Additionally, the repetition of the phrase ‘What do we lose?’ in conjunction with the employment of inclusive language in the word “we”, emphasises and imposes this question towards the audience members. The dramatic tension and suspense which facilitates the playwright’s illustration of the conflict in Paulina’s methods are assisted with further exploitation on visual and aural senses: the serious tone in Paulina’s lines as she slowly counts from one to ten and the visual depiction of Paulina holding the gun in Roberto’s face.

In addition to the penultimate scene, there is a sudden pause following Paulina’s last words – “[Paulina and Roberto] freeze in their positions” (Dorfman, 1991), which help the playwright to sustain the suspenseful atmosphere in the scene. During this moment of suspense, Dorfman utilises “a giant mirror which descends, forcing the members of the audience to look at themselves” (Dorfman, 1991). The exploit of the giant mirror aids the playwright to evoke a personal reaction from the audience members as the mirror ‘forces’ the audience to view their own faces, positioning all of them to confront themselves. The “Selected slowly moving spots flicker over the audience, picking out two or three at a time, up and down rows” (Dorfman, 1991) increases the self-awareness of all the audience members, amplifying the confrontation and ultimately causing them to feel very uncomfortable, as Dorfman highlights the fact that they too, are involved in the issues and themes explored in the play. This direct link between the audience and the play intensifies the portrayal of contradictions in Paulina’s actions and her imposed question of “What do we lose?”, which consequently enables Dorfman to use his portrayal of the contradictions to both discourage his audience members from displaying similar behaviour, and encourage them to re-evaluate the appropriateness of their own means to resolving conflict. As a result of employing both the giant mirror and lighting, Dorfman not only emphasises upon the incongruities of Paulina’s methods revealed through the prop gun, he is also able to urge his audiences to reconsider the morality of their methods to resolving conflict.
Altogether, Ariel Dorfman’s exploitation of dramatic elements: music, the prop cassette recorder and the prop gun reveals the contradictions in Paulina’s attempts to bring justice to Roberto. The exploitation of the audiences’ visual and aural sense through employing other dramatic techniques such as lighting and sound subsequently strengthens the playwright’s portrayal of Paulina’s contradictions. And on top of that, his illustration is additionally amplified through his reliance upon the aforementioned literary devices. However, it is the employment of these dramatic techniques and literary devices in conjunction with the use of the giant descending mirror which enables Dorfman to ultimately achieve his purpose of encouraging his audiences to re-evaluate the morality of their approaches towards resolving conflict. This demonstration of Ariel Dorfman’s versatile ability to masterfully manipulate dramatic and literary techniques is what makes *Death and the Maiden*, as the *London Sunday Times* critiqued, “a terrifying moral thriller which combines brilliant theatricality with clear thought and fierce compassion.” (London Sunday Times, 1991)

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**Bibliography**
