1. Thesis → Expand

THEMES:
- Atonement and forgiveness
- Death and the maiden
- Doubt and ambiguity
- Freedom
- Justice and injustice
- Memory and reminiscence
- Morality and ethics

PROMPT: Torture is not necessarily evil if the objective is to get the truth and right a wrong. ‘Imagine that you are building the edifice of human destiny with the object of making people happy in the finale, of giving them peace and rest at last, but for that you must inevitably and unavoidably torture just one tiny creature, that same child who was beating her chest with her little fist, and your edifice on the foundation of her unrequited tears... would you agree to be the architect of such conditions?’
Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*

RESPONSE:
Torture is ethically indefensible in any circumstance, even if it does result in personal satisfaction, as vividly expressed in the play, *Death and the Maiden*. First, torture not only harms the physical body but it also permanently scars the victim’s mental state. In *Death and the Maiden*, Ariel Dorfman portrays Paulina Salaz as a Chilean torture victim, who is traumatized by her experiences during the torture. Upon encountering Roberto, the torturer, she confesses that “[d]uring all these years not an hour has passed [in which Paulina hasn’t] heard, that same voice [of Roberto], next to [her], next to [her] ear, that voice mixed with saliva” (I, iv).

Additionally these mental scars often act as a catalyst for revenge. Paulina’s brutal experiences form the basis of her will for direct revenge towards Roberto, which involves tying him up and threatening him with a gun. In a sense, Roberto is being tortured by Paulina now, and the cycle of brutality and pain continues through revenge. Thus, torture not only stays with the victims for the rest of their lives, but it can also lead to further torment and wrongdoings in the form of revenge– it initiates a never ending cycle.

Lastly, torture is not justified even if one being harmed leads to another being satisfied. In Dostoevsky’s scenario, humankind itself will benefit, but it would still be ethically condemnable to harm a child because society’s suffering is simply turned upon an innocent being, which after all would not lead to universal happiness. Similarly, in *Death and the Maiden*, Roberto represents Augusto Pinochet’s dictatorship and the inhumane actions they committed simply for their own good. Dorfman criticizes this aspect of ethical injustice in the play, through Paulina’s realization that “something … physical [torture]… wasn’t what [she] really wanted.” In order to serve justice for what Roberto has done, she reaches a conclusion that “[she] want[s] [Roberto] to confess”
Exploring the morality and ethics of torture presented by Dostoevsky in Ariel Dorfman’s *Death and the Maiden*, it can be concluded that torture is not justified even if it may lead to self-satisfaction or a greater good. Also, because the play sets a vague context (the setting is not presented clearly), Dorfman is exploring a universal theme it can be said that this theme is universal: under any circumstance, the result does not justify the process involved in achieving a goal.

‘I am a victim too. I know that those I tortured, they hate me, but I also hate the officers, my superiors, those who got me into this. They made me do it.’ These are the words of a torture victim.

Ideas: Is everyone tortured under a dictatorship? Who is the victim?

‘I am a victim too. I know that those I tortured, they hate me, but I also hate the officers, my superiors, those who got me into this. They made me do it.’ These are the words of a torture victim. Justice is imperative to a functional society, however torture undermines this principle of justice. Torture has negative consequences for everyone directly affiliated with it. If we look at the play *Death and the Maiden*, we see the suffering of the two characters that are affiliated with the torture: Dr. Miranda and Paulina. In contrast, the other character, Gerardo, who is not directly affiliated with the torture, shows a disconnect of emotion and a lack of empathy towards the victims. We can see this through his numerous pleas of rationality from Paulina, “Please, Paulina, could be start being reasonable” (I, iv). On the other hand, Paulina’s eagerness to relieve her emotional burden from her torture experience through various methods, shows her lack of rational judgement: “But I began to realize that wasn’t what I really wanted—something that physical. And you know what conclusion I came to, the only thing I really want? (Brief pause.) I want him to confess.” (II, i). Dr. Miranda, meanwhile, also suffered from the experience as a torturer, as his freedom of treating a human as an object took over his personal morals and resulted in him conducting and enjoying brutal, inhumane acts, “A kind of—brutalization took over my life.” (III,iii)

The characterization in *Death and the Maiden* displays the effects of the torture on the various characters in the play. Dr. Miranda’s characterization refers to his past, giving the possibility of him hiding something important. Meanwhile, Paulina’s character is developed through her feelings and emotions as a result of her torture. Most things that Paulina does in this play are influenced by her past experiences. Gerardo’s character is shown to be one that relies heavily on his ability to reason and his lack of humility. This results in his reaction to the situation being heavily reasoned and inconsiderate of Paulina’s emotion.

In general, humans seek social stability and civilization. Social stability is gained by the sacrifice of our freedom as well as the freedom of others. Yet to reflect on the modern society today,
much similar to the post dictatorship state in Death and the Maiden, we must consider whether such actions taken to build a democracy is justifiable. If it is a forced action, or a measure that had to be taken, such as torture, is it justifiable? When under a government, are we all victims? Even when one is forced to torture another? As individuals in a community, we must have the balance of personal freedom (such as choosing whether to torture someone) and the constraint of living under a government (such as taking the freedom of killing someone for revenge).

‘All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.’ ‘Forgive us we forgive those who sin against us.’ The Bible (The majority of Chileans are Christian)

How does Death and the Maiden explore the theme of atonement and forgiveness?

The play Death and the Maiden by Ariel Dorfman explores the notion of atonement and forgiveness. This play revolves around a married couple, Paulina and Gerardo, when they encounter Doctor Miranda whom Paulina suspects was her rapist.

Through Paulina’s confrontation with Roberto, Dorfman exhibits Paulina’s ideal form of repentance and the necessary steps towards forgiveness. She believes that complete truth is necessary in order to merit forgiveness. In the play, Miranda does not genuinely appear to ask for forgiveness; he does so only in the context of a confession which may be falsified. The necessary steps of how a sinner will be forgiven is quite concrete in Paulina’s eyes, “But I’m not going to kill you because you’re guilty, Doctor, but because you haven’t repented at all. I can only forgive someone who really repents, who stands up amongst those he has wronged and says, I did this, I did it, and I’ll never do it again” (III, I). Paulina, although she ultimately chooses not to kill Miranda, does not forgive him because she felt as though it was not a genuine repentance. Paulina’s statement suggests that one can atone only if they have the courage to admit and recognise their past wrongs. A superficial apology without full acknowledgement of the facts and expression of repentance is meaningless for Paulina, who is desperate to redeem her life and overcome the trauma of her torture.

Gerardo can be seen as a foil to Paulina’s character in their differing views on atonement and forgiveness. Gerardo believes that the complete truth isn’t required in order to merit forgiveness; rather, he believes that the pursuit of truth can aggravate emotional distress. For example, when Paulina interrogates Gerardo about his affair, he is unwilling to answer because “people can die from an excessive dose of the truth.” (III, I) He would rather forego the pains of the past in order to live for the present and the future, to “forgive so we can start again” (III, i). On the other hand, Paulina remains rooted to her traumatic experiences, which prevent her from moving on with her life. Gerardo believes that atonement is required to forgive and move forward, but also that individuals should only pursue it to the extent that it is necessary. He pleads with Paulina to let go of her past, “You’re still a prisoner, you stayed there behind with them, locked in that basement.” (II, i) Gerardo differentiates between pursuing the truth in order to resolve past conflicts and pursuing the truth to satisfy a destructive fixation.

Various ways to make amends for past mistakes can be found in Death and the Maiden, and through these perspectives, Dorfman expresses the abstract nature of atonement and forgiveness: two
very significant acts for humanity. The truth is necessary to come to terms with past mistakes and take the first step to forgiveness for both Paulina and Gerardo—the question is, to what extent and in what manner should the truth of the past be revealed?

“Just as a country cannot move forward by forgetting its history, Death and the Maiden’s present tense narrative depends utterly on the events of the past”

**Justice and Injustice**

~Justice is but another name for revenge~

In the play *Death and the Maiden*, Ariel Dorfman explores different notions of justice through the experiences that the different characters have during what was presumably the Pinochet dictatorship in Chile in the 1970’s.

One of the main views of justice that is explored is that of revenge. Throughout the play Paulina constantly looks for ways to do to Roberto what he did to her. In act II scene I, Paulina contemplates how to rape Roberto like he raped her: “So I asked myself if we couldn’t use a broom. Yes, a broom. Gerardo, you know, a broomstick.” Paulina perceives revenge for what has been done as they only kind of justice because she does not believe that the courts will provide adequate punishment. Even though she says that all she wants is a confession, her feelings do not reflect her actions that she makes in the play. She straps Roberto on a chair and says that she just wants a confession, “I want him to confess. I want him to sit in front of that cassette recorder and tell me what he did - not just to me, everything, to everybody” (II, I)

However in addition, her true inner feelings consistently says that she strongly pursues for revenge on what Roberto has done to her. “What do we lose? What do we lose by killing one of them?” (III, I).

On the other hand, Geraldo is characterized as a person who finds true justice under the court. Even though we find Geraldo, at first, confused about Paulina’s actions towards Roberto, he eventually becomes convinced by Paulina. Although, unlike Paulina, Geraldo does not lose his conscience and claims Roberto should be put under the commission as one of the suspects. However, his sense of justice shifts during the play and we find occasions of his intention to murder Roberto, and see glimpses of his internal struggle, “I’m going to get the guns and blow your fucking brains out.” (II, I). He is conflicted between satisfying a personal need for revenge and the understanding that justice through the court is what is required for the country to move forward.

Lastly, Roberto’s sense of justice differs altogether. Roberto was the trigger to find out the justice from the incident (rape). In the play, he states that he had no intention of torturing, but his superiors forced (demanded) him to do it. So from Roberto’s perspective, his way to find justice was to figure the purpose of the torture and be judged based on the circumstances. In the beginning of the play, Roberto has stated that the country has to find justice, even though the country cannot put the tortures on trial, “Even if we can’t put these people on trial, even if they’re covered by this amnesty they gave themselves- at least their names can be published… In this
country everything finally comes out into the open. Their children, their grandchildren, is it true that you did this, you did what they’re accusing you of, and they’ll have to lie.” (I, II) This quote shows that Roberto also wanted to know how justice existed in the action of torture, which was demanded by his superiors because he did not know the purpose.

In conclusion, justice cannot be defined explicitly, but differs within each character. In *Death and the Maiden*, it clearly portrayed that each characters had different perspectives on justice. In this exploration the reader is subsequently led to ponder how justice can be served in a way that helps the country heal while still punishing those who committed the atrocities.

**Ideas:**

- Each characters have different views of justice
  - Paulina -
    - An eye for an eye
    - An apology/confession
    - To KILL
  - Gerardo -
    - Legal Justice, under the court
    - Punch in the face
  - Roberto -
    - Morally adrift
- In any kind of justice, revenge exists
- Justice is limited

In regards to Paulina, Justice can just be another name for revenge