

**Maria Irene Fornes: *The Conduct of Life* (1985)**

The subtle, underlying pulse of the play seems to stem from the violence of military ruled areas, weaving an everlasting thread of violence through all classes and ethnic groups that compose the society.

**Setting:** Latin American country. Present.

The suburban home—living room, dining room, cellar and adjacent warehouse—of a sado-masochistic Latin American military officer.

**Characters:**

Orlando: a South American petty tyrant who is both a soldier and husband. Of the five characters, three are women who first appear as generic types: Leticia, the wife; Olympia, the housekeeper; Nena, the child sex slave. They are victimized by ruses of male egotism, sexuality and cruelty.

**Dramatic strategy:**

Fornes does not wish to be categorized by restricted labels such as feminist (meaning that her aim is not to produce a feminist play), but she has stated that it is only natural that she writes from a woman's perspective.

**Contradictions within a patriarchal society:**

By the end of Scene 4, Fornes has established the contradictions within a patriarchal society: Orlando's will to power and control of his professional and domestic life; the treatment of the various classes of women as sexual objects and as slaves to domestic routines; the male tendency to violence s hunter, torturer, and rapist; and the various female responses to victimization. In contrast to the male role, the female-gendered activities include nurturing, serving, educating, feeding, housing, clothing, learning, and caring for the poor, the sick, and the well. As the scene fragments juxtapose the gender-related concerns, Fornes' social, sexual, and political ironies are revealed. With no clear gender-related distinctions, we view such activities as sensibilities as beating versus nurturing, depression versus idealism, brutalization versus selflessness, death versus life, and torture versus caring. However, the essential question concerns the "conduct of life for both women and men."

**The "conduct of life":**

After surviving Orlando's beating and sexual abuse, Nena raises the quintessential question about how to conduct herself in the face of unimaginable abuse: "I want to conduct each day of my life in the best possible way." She longs to value things,

people, and pain. She continues, “And if someone should treat me unkindly, I should not blind myself with rage, but I should see them and receive them, since maybe they are in worse pain than me” (Scene 15).

The domestic unit in *The Conduct of Life* is a political microcosm for a tyrannical, male-dominated class system characterized by destructiveness, aggressiveness, and victimization. The system transforms women (and also men) into creatures who are conditioned to engage in betrayal, aggression, and violence. Finally, after great psychological and physical abuse, Leticia betrays Orlando by taking a lover. When Orlando finds out (although Nena is his “kept” woman) and denigrates his wife in public, she takes a gun and kills him. Then, in a highly ambiguous gesture, Leticia places the gun in Nena’s hand and says, “Please.” Consider with her victimization by life, Nena, in a “state of terror” and “numb acceptance,” stares at the gun in her hand and then back at Leticia. This is how the play ends, thus avoiding closure, for there are at least two or more possible explanations for Leticia’s action. Is she asking Nena to take the blame for Orlando’s murder, or is she asking Nena to punish her, to end her life of another wounded creature? The ambiguity of the play’s final moment and the lack of explicit resolution emphasize the *continuing* victimization of women (and men) by a patriarchal society.

In *The Conduct of Life*, the patriarchal death principle is enacted once again and handed on to another generation of women who are instinctively pacifistic and life-affirming. Fornes’ play also asks when this social construct, which is oppressive to men and to women, will end.

In Fornes’ world, women are conditioned and provoked to use “phallogentric” weapons, despite their instinctive dislike of violence, in life-denying acts. In Scene 2, Leticia rails against the killing of creatures, and by Scene 19 she has been provoked into shooting Orlando. However, in shifting the weapon to Nena she shows how victimization brutalizes the mind and spirit and creates other victims in an endless chain of tyranny. In *The Conduct of Life*, all classes and genders are swept up in the aggressive destructiveness of a violent, death-centered society where the essentials of life—food, clothing, shelter, safety, caring, loving—are swept away by oppression and cruelty.

### **Review Questions:**

1. Feminist writers usually reject a linear, forward-moving action in favor of contiguity, or a series of scenes in continuous connection. Fornes does not wish to be categorized by restricted labels such as feminist; she has stated that it is only natural that she writes from a woman's perspective. Point out the characteristics

attributed to her writing technique.

2. Comment on Orlando's being both soldier and husband, a South American petty tyrant, victimizing his wife Leticia, his housekeeper Olimpia, and his sex slave Nena.
3. Are the characters portrayed in the play as stereotypes? If yes, how?
4. Women playwrights write from their personal perspectives which may be philosophical and political observations about the role of women in western society. Examine the roles women play in *The Conduct of Life*. What are the female-gendered activities?
5. Explain how Fornes utilizes a series of fragmentary scenes, elliptical forms, indirect dialogue, interrupted action, and ambiguity as the play structure. Find examples.
6. Discuss the character of Leticia. Why do you think she allows Orlando to keep Nena in the basement as his sexual slave even after she knows definitely what he's doing? What do you think about the ending? Why does she kill Orlando at the end of the play and what do you think happens after she hands the gun to Nena?
7. Discuss the character of Nena, and in particular, the speech she makes at the end of Scene 15. Why do you think, after all she has been through, that she says, "And if someone should treat me unkindly, I should not blind myself with rage, but I should see them and receive them, since maybe they are in worse pain than me." Do you think she is referring to someone in particular and if so, who?
8. How is the domestic unit in *The Conduct of Life* seen as a political microcosm for a tyrannical, male dominated class system?