

The Visit: A Tragi-comedy Study Guide

The Visit: A Tragi-comedy by Friedrich Dürrenmatt

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Plot Summary

The impoverished town of Guellen looks to Claire Zachanassian for financial salvation. When she offers them a million dollars if they kill Ill, a citizen of the town and her former lover, the townspeople initially refuse, but their resolve is worn down by the allure of wealth, and they wind up carrying out her wish.

As the play opens, the townspeople of Guellen are preparing for the arrival of Claire Zachanassian, a millionaire who was born there, hoping that she will help relieve their poverty. Claire arrives with her husband, her eighth, and her butler, Bobby. The townspeople greet her with much fanfare. Among those greeting her is Ill, now an old man, who was once her lover when they were younger. Claire asks to see the places where she and Ill made love and she travels to them. After she leaves, the townspeople remark that she seems to think of herself as some kind of Greek Fate, as if she controls the destiny of men. Meanwhile, Claire and Ill recall their old relationship. Claire was in love with him, but he left her to marry his current wife. Crushed, she left the town and became a prostitute and, luckily, attracted the attention of a rich Armenian whom she married (and later divorced after getting most of his money). Claire and Ill go to the town's hotel, the Golden Apostle, and the mayor gives a speech in praise of her. She thanks the mayor and, to the town's delight, offers them a million dollars. They rejoice, but she interrupts by saying that it comes with a condition. Ill, she says, impregnated her and then bribed two men to lie to a judge to avoid any responsibility. Since she was denied justice then, she demands it now and promises to give the money upon Ill's murder. The mayor, on behalf of the town, insists that they will not do it, but Claire leaves the offer open.

Ill, at first heartened by the town's show of support for him, starts to become suspicious as he notices that everyone in the town, even the priest and mayor, have purchased all sorts of new, expensive goods. He fears that they will get used to living that way and will weaken in the resolve not to kill him so they can sustain their lifestyle. Everyone he conveys this fear to dismisses him, but gradually they change their tactic and focus instead on the "crime" he committed against Claire. Ill tries to leave town, but the townspeople stand in his way while schizophrenically denying that they are preventing him from going.

Ill comes to the conclusion that he brought this misfortune on himself by mistreating Claire. The mayor says that they will hold a town meeting which will decide Ill's fate, and he promises to abide by whatever decision they come to. Ill goes on a ride with his family in his son's new automobile and gets out of the car at Village Wood, a place where he and Claire once made love, and finds her there. They talk for awhile about their past together and what she plans to do with his body. He leaves for the town hall where reporters have gathered to cover the meeting, though they are unaware of the condition Claire attached to her offer. After giving another speech, the mayor has the press leave and the townspeople vote unanimously—except for Ill—to kill him. They immediately surround him and kill him. When the press return, the townspeople say that Ill died of joy to know that the town would be rescued from its poverty. The town then

breaks into chorus and reassures itself, citing the evil of poverty and rejoicing in how wonderful their lives will now be.



Act I, Scene I

Act I, Scene I Summary

Various men of the town of Guellen are gathered at the train station. They note with sadness how few trains stop at their town now. The decrease in train traffic is indicative of Guellen's overall financial troubles, and the men note all of the businesses and industries which have shut down. The city, they say, used to be an artistic center, and they note with pride that Goethe once stayed in Guellen for a night. They look forward to the visit of a millionaire woman with great expectation. Guellen is her hometown, and she is known for her charitable donations to many other cities. The townspeople have gone to great pains planning her reception: the fire-bell will ring, a banner has been made, and the school choir will sing.

A bailiff arrives looking for property to confiscate to pay off debts owed by the town. The mayor assures him that there is nothing left to take, even Guellen's museum has somehow been sold to America. The bailiff leaves to look for himself anyway, and people utter insults at the various groups they blame for Guellen's misfortune—the Jews, the bankers, the Free Masons.

The people realize that the banner they have made up says "Claire Zachanassian" instead of the more familiar "Clarie Wascher." After some debate, they decide to write the latter on the back of the sign and to use it after judging her reaction to them. The men note sorrowfully that Claire is their only hope of salvation—"God won't pay"—and the mayor tries to gather some facts to use in his speech for her arrival from the schoolteacher and Ill, her former lover when they were young. The men are placing their hopes on that relationship and hope Ill can seduce her into giving them money. If she just builds a nursery or library for them, it will not be enough. The mayor informs Ill that the town plans to make him his successor as mayor of Guellen.

Claire finally arrives, after pulling the emergency brake on a train that normally would not stop in Guellen. She steps off the train with her husband, identified for now only as her seventh, and her butler. The ticket-master is furious at her for pulling the emergency brake, but upon finding out who she is, he apologizes and even offers to keep the train there—with all its passengers—until she needs to return. The people receive her as planned and the mayor gives his speech, but it is drowned out in the excitement. Ill addresses her and the two recall the pet names they once used for one another. Ill insists she looks the same, even if he has aged poorly, but she points out his life; she has grown fat like him and she even has an artificial leg now.

Claire starts talking to other townspeople and asking them strange questions. She asks the police officer if he would not mind turning a blind eye to things from time to time and asks the priest if he comforts the condemned, predicting that the death penalty may be reintroduced. The people, thinking she's joking, all laugh, still drunk with excitement over her presence. She asks to see a few places—Petersen's Barn and the Village



Wood—and refuses an automobile when it is offered to her; rather, she has two men to carry her around in a chair. When she leaves, a few men talk about her arrival and note a certain foreboding to her presence; one says she seems like a Greek Fate who controls the destinies of men. They also note that she brought a coffin with her and made a special place for it at the hotel.

Act I, Scene I Analysis

This opening scene gives the background for the rest of the play. The town of Guellen, once a prosperous center for the arts, is plunged into desperate poverty even while the rest of Europe seems to be prospering. Why Guellen seems to be the exception to the economic trends of the rest of Europe is unclear and will not be explained until later. The way the people look forward to Claire's arrival also shows their fixation on money, and in fact, it seems that they put money above anything else, even God, when they mention that "God doesn't pay."

Guellen is purposefully not meant to represent any town, because it is meant to represent every town (or, at least, every Western European town). Therefore, the townspeople of Guellen also represent all Europeans, and so it is safe that this play is a criticism of Europeans in general for being too materialistic. Given his portrayal of the priest—who should be taken to represent religion, probably—it does not seem that Durrenmatt is necessarily calling for a return to Christianity. He is perhaps advocating a more humanistic approach to morality.

The scene also sets the tone for the rest of the play. Durrenmatt's style is purposefully absurd and almost surreal, and this is done nowhere more clearly than in his presentation of Claire. Claire arrives at the station by riding a train which normally does not stop in Guellen. She pulls the emergency brake to make sure it does, and is initially scolded by an official of the railway until he finds out who she is, and like everyone else in the play, consequently wants to slavishly fulfill her everyday desire, even go the ridiculous extent of offering to keep the train and all of its passengers there waiting for days until she wants to leave.



Act I, Scene II

Act I, Scene II Summary

Claire, her carriers, her husband, and Ill arrive at the Village Wood. This, and Petersen's barn, were places Claire and Ill made love as youths. She recalls how their relationship ended. Ill married another woman and left her all alone. She wound up leaving the town and becoming a prostitute in Hamburg, where she attracted the attention of a rich Armenian, the first of many wealthy husbands. Ill insists that it was for her good, because if she had married him she would not have become rich but would be in financial ruin like he is. His domestic life is unhappy, too: he constantly fights with his family. Claire promises that she will not let her hometown continue to suffer. Elated, Ill regrets aloud that they could not have married, and admires her hand as the same "white hand" he knew. She corrects him; it, like her leg, is artificial. She was in a plane crash in Afghanistan and was the only survivor and apparently needed numerous artificial limbs.

They leave for the Golden Apostle, Guellen's hotel, where music is playing in celebration of her. She asks more townspeople a few strange questions—if the doctor writes death certificates and if the gymnast ever uses his muscles for strangling. She then says she would like to eat and not to wait for her husband, because she has filed for divorced and is engaged to marry a German film star. The mayor gives another speech—or perhaps the same speech—in her honor. She then says how moved she is to be back at her hometown and promises to give Guellen a million dollars—five hundred thousand for the government and five hundred thousand to be split among the people—in return for the execution of "justice." When the people do not understand, she explains that she became pregnant with Ill's child and that he bribed two men to lie and say they had had sex with her. Those two men are now her servants, but were blinded and castrated by Toby and Roby, her "gum-chewing" chair-carriers, who, she explains, are American criminals. The court ruled in Ill's favor and Claire has not forgotten the injustice. Therefore, she insists, in return for the million, that Ill be killed. The mayor protests, on behalf of the town, that they are not savages.

Act I, Scene II Analysis

It is obvious that the fact that Claire's body is largely artificial—so far one of her legs and her hand—is meant to be symbolic of her personality. It is meant to suggest that, at least on an ethical level, she is not fully human and it mirrors her utter disregard for the plight of the poor, for the men she marries (and inevitably divorces after scamming them), and even for her hometown. Her moral decay can be traced directly to her possession of so much wealth; it has allowed her to fulfill her every desire, which can be dangerous to a soul that wants to do many evil things.



Though Claire's intentions are not yet fully revealed, her questions to the various townspeople clearly foreshadow the deal she will later extend to Guellen, though their significance is initially lost on the townspeople who would not dare to question the woman they see as their savior.

While the possession of excessive wealth, in Durrenmatt's eyes, can lead to the corruption of one's character, there seems to be the suggestion that poverty can have negative effects, too. Ill says that the lack of money in his family has caused a lot of internal conflict and has made his home a generally unhappy one. These positions—the condemnation of extreme wealth and the recognition of the negative effects of poverty—are not at all incompatible. In fact, when combined, it seems to outright support an agenda of redistribution of wealth from people like Claire to people like Ill and his family.



Act II, Scene I

Act II, Scene I Summary

Ill watches through his window as townspeople bring flowers to adorn the coffin Claire has set up as a visual reminder of her offer. Scared, he tries to organize a family meal, but his son and daughter make excuses to leave. A man enters the shop asking for cigarettes more expensive than usual and asks to charge it to his account. Next, a pair of women come into the shop and provoke Ill's curiosity by also ordering goods more expensive than they usually do. A third man comes in and orders very expensive liquor. In every case, the people ask for their purchases to be charged to their accounts. The eunuch twins pass by his window carrying the fishing implements of Claire's now ex-husband, who apparently has taken legal possession of his tobacco farms. Claire talks from a nearby balcony as Ill takes care of business in his shop, noting with some curiosity that people tend to be a bit more liberal in their purchase, and always charging it to their accounts. He also starts to notice that his customers all have new clothing and new shoes. They make excuses when he asks them how they can afford such things since everyone in Guellen is broke, but he is able to find out that they are all buying it on debt. He gradually starts to fear that all of this debt is being taken out on the expectation that he will be killed and the town will receive its reward from Claire.

The police officer arrives at Ill's shop and starts drinking a beer. Ill demands that he arrest Claire for threatening his life. The police officer says he cannot arrest her since it was "obvious" that she was merely joking and no one took her seriously. He says he can do nothing until someone actually tries to kill him. Ill then discovers that the police officer is wearing new shoes, too, and he starts ordering more expensive drinks. Ill starts questioning the police officer about how he, and all the other townspeople, intend to pay for all the new things they are buying, especially the goods they are purchasing from him on credit. The police officer dismisses the question and takes his rifle up and begins loading it as Ill explains his fear. If the town gets used to living like this, he argues, they will not want to give it up, and the temptation to kill him will grow stronger. The police officer, still playing with his gun, continues to dismiss his question, saying that the police are here to protect him. As he is talking, the barrel of the gun starts to point at Ill, and Ill instinctively starts to put his hands up. The police officer decides to leave however, because apparently Claire has lost the black panther she brought to town and it is terrorizing the citizens.

Meanwhile, Claire has been discussing, among other things, her ex-husbands. All of them were rich business-owners and the reader gets the impression that she cheated all of them out of their wealth, and that is how she has become so wealthy. In fact, there are so many of them (she is now on her eighth) and they were so meaningless to her that she can hardly keep them straight in her mind.



Act II, Scene I Analysis

Though the town is initially supportive of Ill, even in this scene which takes place the day after, the reader can already see that they are starting to doubt their initial rejection of Claire's offer. For one, everyone has already begun to borrow to buy various luxuries: nicer clothes, finer liquor, better food, and so on. They would not do so—and perhaps their creditors would not allow them to do so—unless they expected to come into possession of money in the near future, and with Guellen's otherwise slim prospects, it is obvious they must be counting on the money from Claire. Ill quickly realizes this for himself, and this scene marks the beginning of his anxiety.

However, as of now, the town is still unsure about what it will do, and while the increased spending does worry Ill, he does not associate it directly with a decision to kill him. Rather, he sees that the people are getting used to living better than they have in the past, and he does not think that they will want to return to their previous way of life and will do anything, including killing him, to maintain it. This can be read, perhaps, as a criticism of Western society's obsession with material goods and its corresponding inability to sacrifice them, even for a good cause.



Act II, Scene II

Act II, Scene II Summary

Ill arrives at Town Hall to talk to the mayor. Everyone is slightly on edge because the black panther is running around nearby. Ill becomes suspicious when the mayor tells him that, in response to the panther, he has ordered all of the townspeople with weapons to come at once. Ill notices that the mayor, too, has gone into debt to purchase new, finer amenities. He demands that the mayor give him official protection from any would-be assassin. The mayor tells him that he should go to the police and Ill says that he already has, and the police seem to be on the take, too. The mayor then tries to reassure him by recalling the lofty heritage of Guellen; the citizens would never stoop to murder, he says. The mayor becomes a bit resentful when Ill demands Claire's arrest and points out that perhaps Claire has a point and that what Ill did to Claire was a pretty bad thing to do. The mayor puts an end to the discussion and, further, tells Ill that his chances of becoming mayor have been dashed by the revelation of his past crime against Claire. Ill, naturally, is not consoled and insists that the town is plotting his death.

Ill then visits the Guellen priest who, curiously, has a rifle strapped around him; he explains that he only has it with him in case he comes across the panther. Ill asks the father for help and explains that he is scared that the people will kill him. The priest, like the others, dismisses his fear, and suggests that it really is Ill's conscience that is troubling him. Every time Ill offers a piece of evidence that the townspeople are conspiring against him—however legitimate—the priest turns the conversation around on Ill and says that really it is the miserable state of his soul which should trouble him, not his fear of his fellow citizens. Ill becomes even more alarmed when he realizes the priest, too, is living more extravagantly; the church has purchased a new bell.

Act II, Scene II Analysis

Ill's conversation of mayor, who already has spoken for the town in rejecting Claire's offer, shows the continued progress of the town towards killing Ill. Like everyone else, the mayor has upgraded his standard of living and, also like everyone else, he dismisses that it has any significance when Ill expresses his concern about it. The dismissal of Ill's anxiety, however, progresses into resentment. He is outraged, or at least feigns outrage, that Ill would suggest that the people of his own hometown would conspire against him in such a wicked way. The next step is rationalization: The mayor starts to see that Claire has a point perhaps, and what Ill did to her was terrible. He does not yet assert that Ill is deserving of death on that account, but it is clear that his thoughts are beginning to tend in that direction. The exterior actions of the townspeople also mirror the ambivalence of their thoughts. Many carry around guns, ostensibly to defend themselves from the panther, but, as Ill points out, their reaction is excessive. They probably do not yet mean to kill Ill, but they do seem to want deadly weapons on

hand. Even the priest, the representation of European religion, succumbs to this ambivalence, and carries with him a rifle.



Act II, Scene III

Act II, Scene III Summary

Ill is headed to the train station with a suitcase, apparently planning to leave. The townspeople are gathered there, too, questioning him and offering to take him there. Suspicious, Ill declines and tries to go on his way, but they stand in his way. They ask him where he is going and he gives a few possibilities—none probably true—to get them off his case. He says there is no particular reason he is living, just that a man cannot live in the same place his whole life. The townspeople try to convince him to stay. Guellen, they say, is the safest place for him.

The schoolmaster asks why Ill is so suspicious and why he thinks the people are planning to kill him. He responds by pointing out all the new signs of wealth in the once impoverished town: new builds are going up, the people are wearing nice, new clothes, and people are starting to plan vacations. As always, the people dismiss him, and refuse to acknowledge that there is anything significant about their new purchases. Finally, Ill, with townspeople in tow, arrives at the train station. His train arrives and he tries to get on, but the townspeople stand in his way. He tries to get them to move, but they act like they are not in his way and urge him to take his train. Unable to escape, Ill collapses in fear and despair.

Act II, Scene III Analysis

Ill's thwarted attempt to leave Guellen is a perfect illustration of the kind of psychological division the people of Guellen are undergoing. While physically preventing Ill from leaving, they vocally deny that they stand in his way. They refuse to see the reality for what it is and they reinforce their absurd refusal by loudly asserting it. One can imagine that this mirrors quite well their interior evolution. As their minds subconsciously move closer and closer to wanting to kill Ill for the money, their conscious selves stay busy reassuring them that they would never do such thing, which is in such contradiction of their noble, Western principles. If their success in preventing Ill from leaving is any indication, the subconscious desire will be victorious.



Act III, Scene I

Act III, Scene I Summary

Claire is at Petersen's Barn, one of the places she visited where her and Ill once made love. The schoolteacher and doctor arrive. After flattering her on the grandeur of her recent wedding, they try to convince her to give the town money without the death of Ill. They say the people of Guellen have fallen hopelessly into debt, but cannot abandon their "Western principles" and kill Ill. All they wish for, they say, is for Guellen to return to its former glory. They appeal to her greed by saying that investing in the town might well turn a profit for her; the industries just need capital. Unfortunately for their case, Claire informs them that she already owns most of Guellen and it was her decision to shut down the industries. She explains that when she left the town, despairing and heartbroken, she took with her a grudge against it and especially against Ill. When she married into great wealth, she decided to exact her revenge on the city and took control of it, sinking it into poverty. The men express their horror at her actions, and implore her to change her mind, but she continues to insist on Ill's death and leaves. She has already decided to divorce her eighth husband and the ninth is on the way.

Act III, Scene I Analysis

The next step in the psychological evolution, or devolution, of the Guellen townspeople is an attempt to bargain and avoid the bad while still getting the good. They try pointlessly to convince Claire to give them the money without doing what she wants. They know, or should know, that pointing out that Guellen's industry could be quite profitable to her if she invested in it is futile; whatever profit it could make would surely be insignificant to the vast fortunes she possesses, and it seems like it could hardly be profitable compared to simply marrying another millionaire, who seem to be in endless supply.

The dark side of Claire's absurd character is developed in greater detail in these scenes. That Claire is motivated by revenge is obvious already—hardly anything else could motivate her desire to see Ill dead. The desperation of her revenge, however, is displayed by the fact that she bought basically all of the businesses in Guellen for the express purpose of exerting this kind of control over it. She wanted to make the people desperate so they would do what she wanted. In addition to the desire for vengeance, this also shows that she has a love simply for power; after all, if she just wanted Ill dead, there surely could be easier and quicker ways than the route she has gone. She would not be satisfied hiring a simple assassin. Rather, she wants to show how total her control over the world is by making people corrupt their morals to accomplish what she wants.



Act III, Scene II

Act III, Scene II Summary

A few people are gathered in Ill's shop talking to his wife. Ill is upstairs compulsively pacing in his room. The townspeople continue to give various justifications for Claire and criticize Ill for his past action. They attribute his current state not to fear of death but to guilt over what he did to her. They threaten to take action against him if he continues to pretend like Claire was seriously threatening him. A few of the men decide to post themselves at the staircase to Ill's living quarters, ostensibly to make sure he does not leave and continue to spread lies about Claire. Reporters have finally arrived in the town and they want to make sure that they do not catch wind of Claire's proposal. They start to arrive at the shop, inquiring about Ill's relationship with Claire, and Ill's wife answers their questions. When asked whether Ill ever regrets not marrying Claire, she tells them that money makes no one happy by itself and tells them that she and Ill married out of love.

The schoolmaster gathers up courage and decides he is going to tell the press about Claire's offer. The people protest and try to get him to leave. Ill comes downstairs, disturbed by all the sound in his shop. The schoolmaster explains what he is doing, expecting Ill to be thankful, but Ill tells him to stay quiet and tells the press that the schoolmaster is a babbling drunk. He poses for a few pictures for the press and when the reporters leave, the people thank him for not "shooting his mouth" about Claire's proposal and extend the hope that it can still be solved peacefully. Ill explains that he has thought about what he did to Claire and realized that he brought this situation on himself. The schoolmaster takes him aside and predicts what will happen: The people will eventually be too tempted by Claire's offer and will kill him. He even includes himself: Though he speaks rationally now, he, too, will be swayed.

Ill notices his family has a number of new possessions, including his son's new car. He asks to go for a ride in it with the family, but is interrupted by the mayor. He has brought a gun for Ill, offering it at first as a present, but Ill refuses. He says that the city will decide his case soon and asks Ill if he will submit to its judgment; Ill says he will. The mayor wants to keep the press in the dark about Claire's offer and explains that, by all appearances, Ill will be the savior of the town who convinced Claire to give the money. He then offers the gun to Ill again, asking him to commit suicide for the sake of the town. Ill refuses and the mayor expresses his frustration, saying that suicide would be the decent thing for him to do now.

Ill now goes on a ride with his family in his son's new car. Ill has never been in a car and wants to experience riding in one before he dies. He asks his son to drive slowly through town so he can see, for the last time, he fears, the town he has spent seventy years of his life in. He notices a number of new builds going up already and remarks that Guellen is starting to return to its old glory. His daughter, he discovers, has started



receiving a sophisticated education in French and literature on borrowed money. They go through the Village Woods and Ill asks to get out.

Act III, Scene II Analysis

The schoolmaster now foresees what Ill has been fearing all along. The money will be too tempting to the townspeople and they will kill him. In fact, even the schoolmaster, who is the most upright and intelligent of all the people in Guellen, and the one who was moments ago willing to courageously expose Claire's intention to the entire world, knows that he will be corrupted. This shows that the power of money is so great that no one is safe from its grasp.

Ill's sudden change of heart about his fate, which is become clearer to him every moment, should surprise the reader. Ill showed no real sign of remorse about his action in the past, and even seemed to dismiss how bad it was: After all, he pointed out, she wound up better off anyway. The gravity of the situation seems to have prompted him to do quite of bit of reflection—signified by his compulsive pacing in his apartment—and he realized that, in his own way, he was justifying his actions, much like the townspeople now are justifying his death. One must wonder, however, if there is an element of strategy in his expression of remorse. While surely he is now genuinely repentant, perhaps he hopes to evoke the pity of the town and make them reconsider killing him.



Act III, Scene III

Act III, Scene III Summary

Ill finds Claire in the Village Woods which, he finds out, she owns. She is there with her new, ninth husband, a Nobel Prize-winner. Ill congratulates her on her new marriage and notices the two eunuchs are no longer with her. He asks where they went and she explains they were annoying her so she shipped them off to Hong Kong. Ill brings up the child they had together and asks what happened to it, since Claire had left town before it was born. It was a girl named Genevieve but the Salvation Army took the child away almost immediately after birth so Claire does not know what happened to her. All she knows is that the child died at some point of, she thinks, meningitis—she cannot recall for sure.

After they briefly recall the time they had together when they were young, Ill thanks her for the decorations to his future coffin and tells her that the city council is going to meet to decide his fate, and he is sure he will be sentenced to death and killed. Unapologetic, she says that he will be taken to a mausoleum she owns after his death and assures him that his final resting place will overlook a beautiful landscape. After his death she says she will no longer be haunted by him; he will become just another memory.

Act III, Scene III Analysis

This scene helps the reader understand Claire's inner psychological workings. As a rich woman—the richest woman in the world, even—Claire always gets what she wants: If she wants to travel somewhere, she can; if she wants to buy up an entire town, she can; if she wants to buy a panther, she can. So far, however, she has not been able to shake the heartbreak Ill caused her when she was young and so, once again, she uses the same tactic of throwing money at the problem, hoping it will go away. The reader is forced to ask, however, if killing Ill will really solve the problem like she thinks it will.



Act III, Scene IV

Act III, Scene IV Summary

Ill arrives at the Town Hall where the press has gathered to cover the town meeting, though they are still unaware of its full meaning; they are not aware of Claire's offer. The mayor begins speaking and offers his thanks publicly to Ill for securing the donation from Claire. He tells the mayor that he will respect whatever decision the city makes regarding whether to accept or reject Claire's offer. The mayor asks various groups whether they have anything to ask or say to Ill—the Church, the doctor, the schoolmaster—and all of them remain silent. He proceeds to hold the vote to accept or reject Claire's offer and everyone, except Ill, raises their hand in approval. The mayor, and the citizens with him, insist, however, that they did not vote out of the desire for money, but rather on principle: They cannot let a crime go unpunished, they say. The camera recording the town hall malfunctioned and the reporters ask the town to redo their public affirmation of justice and the people oblige them. The mayor lures the press out of the room with the promise of refreshment, leaving the townspeople alone with Ill.

After making sure none of the press is still present, the town prepares to kill Ill. He asks for more time and requests that they at least kill him where he lived, but they refuse. The priest tries to offer Ill some words of encouragement before his death, but Ill refuses. He asks the priest, instead, to pray for Guellen. Ill is led to the center of the stage in the town's auditorium. The people surround him and kill him. A reporter comes in and asks what happened and the doctor tells them that Ill suffered a heart attack. He died of joy, they say, at the fortune that Guellen has come into. Claire takes the body, puts it into the coffin, and gives the mayor the check, as promised. The town gradually improves: New builds are erected, old buildings are renovated, and the people dress in finer clothes.

The town goes into a chorus condemning poverty as the enemy of mankind and the cause of great evil in the world, clearly trying to justify the deed they just committed. They praise the great progress their city has made and rejoice that their lives are now much more comfortable. Claire leaves with the coffin and the priest says a prayer, invoking God to protect the town and their new possessions.

Act III, Scene IV Analysis

This final scene reveals two more important aspects of the town's psychology. First of all, it shows that no individual is willing to take responsibility. Much like a firing squad, in which none of the gunmen knows for certain whether he killed the prisoner, there is no clear murderer. Everyone surrounds him and he just dies. While the individual psyche may not be able to withstand the guilt of murder, if all the townspeople come together, they can diffuse the guilt among them all, and diminish it almost to nothing.



However, it is clear that there is still some sense of guilt, for the chorus which concludes the play is largely a justification for their action. Poverty is too much for them bear, they argue, and it also the cause of moral evil, anyway. Thus, by killing Ill, they convince themselves that they are preventing immoral acts in the future.

Postscript

Postscript Summary

In the postscript, Durrenmatt gives a set of basic directions for anyone who wishes to produce his play. He says, first of all, that a director should not try to put more meaning into it than it deserves. It is, first of all, a comedy, and it is meant to entertain. There is no hidden, symbolic meaning, though it does certainly have serious themes, namely that money has the power to corrupt anyone and Durrenmatt admits that he might not act any differently than the people in his play. It is not meant to be an allegory, and thus any attempt to see Claire as a symbol for the Marshall Plan or justice or anything else is illegitimate.

The play is supposed to have similarities to Greek Tragedies, but it is also supposed to contrast with them. In the context of a Greek drama, Ill's death would be of great significance; perhaps it would even be the death of a hero. However, in Guellen, a fictional city somewhere in Europe, his death is meaningless, because the modern world has no room for the classical notions of heroism and virtue.

He says any production of the play should not involve elaborate scenery. It is modeled after the fashion of old folk plays, and it is suited to use only very sparse props, costumes, and sets.

Postscript Analysis

While Durrenmatt instructs theater directors not to try to impose excessive meaning on his play, it is interesting that he does not go so far as to say exactly how much meaning is there. While he is quite clear that the play is not an allegory, even if one completely trusts the postscript, there is room to think that Durrenmatt is making a general statement about Europe and is criticizing it economically and culturally.



Characters

Ill

Ill is an old man in his seventies who owns a shop in the town of Guellen. Like everyone else, he is very poor. Of all the people in Guellen, he was the closest to Claire Zachanassian, who was his lover when they were young. He got her pregnant and then bribed two men, Koby and Loby, to lie to a judge and say that they had slept with her and thereby avoided any responsibility for the child. Heartbroken, Claire left Guellen and became a prostitute. When she returns decades later, she still holds a bitter grudge against Ill and offers the impoverished town a million dollars if they kill him.

When the townspeople initially reject her offer, Ill is heartened, calling it his finest moment. However, he starts to become suspicious when he sees various people in the town with new possessions which they could never afford before. He suspects they will grow accustomed to living this way and the temptation to maintain their lifestyle by killing him will become too strong. The townspeople all ignore him when he expresses his fear and turn the problem back on him, heaping blame on him for how he treated Claire. In time, Ill comes to accept that the situation he now finds himself in is his fault and feels genuine remorse for mistreating Claire. Before he goes to the town meeting—where he is sure he will be sentenced to die—he visits Claire and talks to her almost like a friend. The townspeople unanimously vote for him to die and murder him. When the press finds him dead, they say that he died of a heart attack because he was so filled with joy.

Claire

Claire Zachanassian, formerly Claire Wascher, is a woman, now in her sixties, who was born in the city of Guellen. When she was still in her teenage years, she fell in love with Ill, and she was crushed when he left her to marry another woman and used trickery to avoid having any responsibility for the child he fathered. Despairing, Claire left Guellen and gave the child up for adoption (later, she says, it would die of disease—meningitis, she thinks). She then became a prostitute and credits her red hair with attracting the attention of a millionaire Armenian. She seduced the Armenian into marrying her and then proceeded to scam him out of his money and divorced him. She then preys on several other men in this same fashion, and by the time the play starts she is on her seventh husband (and by the time it ends, she is on her ninth). By virtue of all of the money she has gotten through these marriages, she is the richest woman in all of Europe and thus when she comes to her impoverished hometown, the people look to her for financial salvation.

Still bitter over forty years later, Claire offers the town a million dollars on the condition that they will execute justice and kill Ill. Though the people initially resist, Claire leaves the offer on the table, confident that they will cave. This shows one of Claire's most



prominent qualities: her confidence in her ability to control her world. Her vast sums of money have allowed her to do nearly anything she wants, and she thinks that she can erase the shame and heartbreak of her youth by killing their instigator, III.

Mayor

The mayor of Guellen represents the town in rejecting Claire's offer initially, but is the leader of the town at the town meeting which decides to kill III.

Schoolmaster

The schoolmaster is the only person in the town who is willing to stand up for III and tries to tell the Press about Claire's offer, but is stopped by III.

Priest

The Priest, the play's representative of religion, is depicted as just as cowardly as everyone else in the town in what is perhaps a symbolic statement about religion.

Policeman

The policeman refuses to arrest Claire for her threat against III's life, claiming that she has committed no crime in doing so, and denies that Claire really meant to threaten his life.

Mrs. III

Mrs. III is the woman III left Claire to marry. Despite their relationship, Mrs. III seems to go along with the rest of the town in their gradual decision to murder III.

Toby and Roby

Toby and Roby, often described as chewing gum, are convicts from America who Claire hired to perform various tasks for her, including castrating Koby and Loby and carrying her around in her chair.

Koby and Loby

Koby and Loby are the men III hired to lie for him in court when the paternity of Claire's child was determined. Claire tracked them down and had them blinded and castrated.



Claire's Husbands

Claire's husbands are all millionaires through various means and her only regard for them is how much money they have. As soon as she has their money, she divorces them, and in the course of the play, which occurs only over a few days, she has three different husbands.

Ill's Son

Ill's son buys an automobile and takes Ill for a ride before he dies.

Ill's Daughter

Ill's daughter takes out debt—presumably expecting to become rich when Claire gives money to the town—to receive a fine education.



Objects/Places

Guellen

Guellen is the setting of the play. It is a fictional town somewhere in central Europe. It can be taken as representative of Europe in general.

The Train Station

The train station is where the play begins and the people of the town judge Guellen's decline by how few trains stop there.

Petersen's Barn

Petersen's Barn is one of the sites Claire wishes to visit upon her return. When they were young, Claire and Ill made love there.

Konrad's Village Wood

Konrad's Village Wood is another place Ill and Claire made love when they were young. Claire visits it with Ill and it is where Ill meets Claire to talk to her before his death.

The Golden Apostle

The Golden Apostle is the town's hotel.

Ill's Shop

Ill owns a shop which sells mainly food and drinks.

The Town Hall

The Town Hall is where the townspeople decide to accept Claire's offer and kill Ill.

The Coffin

Claire brings a coffin with her and sets it up prominently in the Golden Apostle. She uses it as a visual reminder to the townspeople of her offer and as a way to intimidate Ill.



The Cathedral

The Cathedral is where the black panther escapes to and it is where Claire marries her eighth husband.

The Black Panther

Claire brings a black panther with her and it escapes into the town.



Themes

The Corruptive Power of Money

The main theme of the play is that the allure of money is strong enough to corrupt anyone, no matter how upright or enlightened they think they might be. Naturally, no one would like to think that they could be tempted into doing something as immoral as murder simply by money, and the progression of the townspeople from refusal and outrage to committing murder is meant to mirror the progression that any individual might experience. Thus, after their initial outrage, the townspeople are immediately of two minds about it. While not yet ready to commit to murder, they are willing to have a taste of the reward for murder, and begin purchasing for themselves expensive new clothes and expensive drinks. As Ill points out, the townspeople will get used to their new standard of living and will do whatever it takes—namely, murder—to keep it. The actions of the townspeople also now start to depart from what they say. While all verbally refuse wanting to kill him, almost unconsciously the police officer finds his loaded rifle pointed at Ill or the mayor inexplicably calls for all of the men of the town to come with their weapons to protect the town from the escaped panther. This discrepancy between word and action culminates at the train station at the end of the Act II. Ill is trying to leave but the townspeople physically stand in his way while verbally urging him to go.

The next step in their progression is justification. The townspeople start to focus on the crime Ill committed against Claire. While they might not think that this justifies his death, in their minds, killing him certainly seems more reasonable. The mayor is the first to suggest this and the priest brings it to its logical conclusion by blaming all of Ill's fears and troubles on a soul that is clearly bound for damnation. That these words come from the person of the priest show that religion is no absolute safeguard against greed.

The final step in the psychological progression is for the townspeople to explicitly come to terms with what they must do. It is interesting that they can only do it as an assembly; no lone assassin is willing to kill Ill. This probably shows that while the people are willing to sacrifice their moral principles for Claire's money, none is willing to brave the guilt alone. The guilt might be tolerable, they hope, if it is dispersed among everyone in the town.

Humor

Before any psychological, moral, or political conclusions can be drawn from the play, it must be recognized that it is, first of all, a comedy, and Durrenmatt makes this point explicitly in the Postscript. One of the methods Durrenmatt uses to make his play humorous is exaggeration. Very few things in the play are depicted moderately. Claire is not simply rich, she is the richest woman in the world. Guellen is not simply poor, it is so penniless that it even had to sell its museum (the logistics of which is never quite



explained). As the play goes on, the extremes continue to be exaggerated. Claire, for example, who has been married several times before the play begins, has three different husbands over the course of play, which takes place in just the span of a few days. In fact, she goes through her eighth husband so fast that people are still remarking how wonderful the wedding was when she informs them that she has filed for divorce and her future ninth husband is already on the way. It as if Claire has an unlimited supply of millionaires which she can draw upon at will.

As the title of the play suggests, it is not just any type of comedy, but a "tragicomedy." That is, *The Visit* mixes very light, humorous elements with very dark, disturbing elements. Claire's entire character is certainly absurd, and any audience is sure to laugh at her ridiculous personality, but when she announces that the town will receive the money only if Ill dies, the townspeople—and probably the audience, too—go quiet. The effect of such a sudden transition has the effect of making the dark moments even darker and was surely a consideration present in Durrenmatt's mind as he was writing the play.

Guellen as a Symbol for Europe

Though Durrenmatt goes out of his way in the Postscript to warn directors of his play to not saturate their productions with symbolism, it should not be inferred that his characters are not symbolic of anything whatsoever. First, a reader of the play should not necessarily take Durrenmatt at his word; many authors have attempted to minimize attempts to interpret their works beyond the literal letter of the book, so to speak, perhaps trying to ward off interpretations which find symbolism in every syllable and drown out the true meaning of the book. Second, Durrenmatt is giving directions to theater directors, not to interpreters. Durrenmatt might think that his play speaks for itself, and therefore a director need not impose his own interpretation of the play onto his audience. After all, the director is not necessarily a literary analyst and he might miss the true point of the play.

That said, it is completely reasonable to think that the city of Guellen and its inhabitants are meant to represent Europe, or perhaps all of humanity. The city of Guellen is fictional and very little specific information is given about it; all Durrenmatt says himself is that it is somewhere in central Europe. If Guellen, then, is not a specific city, it is very easy for the reader to think of it as any city: The less that is specified about it, the easier it is to imagine as one's own hometown. Likewise, with the exception of the two man characters—Ill and Claire—all of the townspeople are referred to only or primarily by their profession, leading the reader once again to think of the characters as representations of general types of people, rather than concrete individuals. Thus, when the priest is in on the conspiracy against Ill's life, it is reasonable to think that Durrenmatt is suggesting that not even religion is safe from being corrupted by the allures of money. When the police officer joins with the town in calling for his death, Durrenmatt is suggesting that the supposed guardians of law and order are not above the temptations humanity as a whole faces.

Style

Point of View

Ill's outlook on the world is, initially, like the rest of the town: he looks towards Claire as a kind of savior from the miseries of poverty. In fact, he even has a privileged role in trying to squeeze money out of her, as her former lover. Naturally, his optimism does not survive Claire's proposal, which entails his murder. He then becomes suspicious—and generally rightly so—of his fellow townspeople. He looks with dread on the new purchases they make on credit and wonders how they intend to pay their debts without killing him. His fears run so deep that he even tries to leave the town—where he has lived for seventy years—and his family to escape what appears to be certain death. After he is prevented from leaving, he spends some time reflecting in his apartment. During that time, he comes to the conclusion that, in some way, what Claire has done is justice and he deserves whatever the town decides to do. He does not seem to conclude that he deserves death, however, as he refuses to take his life; at least, he wants his death to be at the town's hands and not his own.

Claire's actions are driven by two motives. First, Claire is obviously motivated by revenge. Her heart is still broken by what Ill did to her, even if it wound up, in some way, good for her. One must think that her heartache still persists because she does not seem to have ever really found love after him: all of the men she married, she married for money. Second, Claire is motivated by an intense desire for control. For the most part, she has been able to satisfy this desire with her vast sums of money. For example, her effort to control the fortunes of Guellen was as simple as buying up all of its industries and shutting them down. Likewise, she hopes to conquer her heartache by throwing money at the problem. She knows there is some sum of money for which the people of Guellen will abandon their morals. One must wonder, though, if she really solved her problem—if killing Ill will really relieve the lack of love in her life. Durrenmatt does not answer either way.

Setting

The entire play takes place in Guellen, a fictional town somewhere in central Europe. Durrenmatt intentionally provides only sparse details about the town, and the effect of this is to turn it into a kind of general idea of a European town, and thus gives the reader the impression that it stands for every town. The town does not appear to have a very large population; in fact, in keeping with Durrenmatt's exaggerated style, it seems as if the entire population of characters consists of those mentioned in the play. This reading is reinforced by the fact that the stage directions reuse characters such as "Man One" in various roles; the effect on the audience of seeing only a few different faces throughout the play is obvious.



The townspeople of Guellen seem to be primarily concerned with returning the city to its past glory. They boast that famous European personalities visited it in the past like Goethe and Brahms. It also was once the home to various industries, all of which are now idle. They hope that with some money from Claire they can reinvigorate those industries and enjoy some of the economic prosperity around them. Of course, they are unaware that their economic troubles are in fact caused by Claire, who bought up the industries and shut them down.

Language and Meaning

The people of Guellen all seem to speak at a level more sophisticated than one would imagine the citizens of a poor city would be capable of. For example, the townspeople frequently use obscure words like "demoniac" and seem to be casually familiar with Greek mythology, like when they compare Claire's demeanor to one of the fates. They are also very proud of their "Western principles" and it is surely strange that they would specify that they are "Western" and not "Christian" or "German"; they sound more like philosophers than common townsfolk.

Claire's speech follows this same pattern, but it has a slightly more lyrical quality to it. In the scene in Act II where Clair is heard from her balcony while Ill is in his shop, she seems at times to almost be in song. Perhaps the purpose of this is to make Claire seem almost otherworldly, which would fit the townspeople's assessment of her as a Fate.

At the end of the play, the townspeople break into a metered, rhyming chorus. This also fits a Greek motif, and the stage directions even direct that the townspeople are broken into "two choruses, resembling those of Greek tragedy" (98). Durrenmatt may have included this to fit the play—perhaps ironically—into the mold of a Greek tragedy. In the Postscript, he mentions that there are supposed to be similarities and Ill's death is supposed to be, in a certain sense, heroic. More precisely, in a Greek tragedy, Ill's death would be heroic; in the modern world, however, it is meaningless.

Structure

The play is divided into three acts and the acts are divided into separate, though unmarked scenes. While some scene changes are mentioned explicitly, others happen seamlessly, and the characters are described as simply walking from, say, the shop to the town hall.

The first act begins with several townspeople gathered at the train station. They note with regret how few trains stop in Guellen, a sign of the city's decline. More people arrive as the time for Claire Zachanassian's arrival approaches. Claire is a millionaire who was born in Guellen but left several decades ago. The townspeople hope that Claire will give them money so they can restore their town to what it once was. Claire arrives and the town gives her an elaborate reception. After she visits a few places around town, the mayor gives a speech in her honor at the town's hotel. Claire then



delights the town by offering them a million dollars, but attaches a condition which they cannot yet accept: they must kill Ill, her former lover.

The second act begins at Ill's shop. Ill was initially reassured by the town's refusal of Claire's proposal, but his confidence slips as he sees the people drawn more and more to the idea of becoming wealthy. He goes to the police station and insists upon Claire's arrest for threatening his life, but the police officer dismisses it, saying that she has committed no crime and her threat was a joke. Ill then goes to the mayor to appeal to him who, likewise, dismisses his fear. The mayor then turns around the situation on Ill and says that what Ill did to Claire was rather wicked. Ill, growing more anxious by the moment, decides to leave Guellen, but the townspeople stand in his way at the train station.

In the third act, the press has arrived to cover Claire's visit to her hometown. They are aware that she has offered the town money, but they are not aware of the condition she attached to it, and the townspeople are anxious to keep it that way. The schoolmaster, the most enlightened of all the townspeople, gathers up courage and tries to tell the press the town's secret, but Ill himself stops him. He has realized that he brought this situation on himself. The town is planning to vote later that day on whether or not to accept Claire's proposal and Ill tells the mayor he will abide by whatever decision is made. As Ill expects, the town votes in favor of Claire's proposal, and he is killed. Claire gives a check for the amount promised and the people break into chorus, simultaneously rejoicing over their good fortune and reassuring themselves that what they did was not wrong.



Quotes

"Man Three: We were a city of the Arts, then.
Man Two: One of the foremost in the land.
Man One: In Europe.
Man Four: Goethe spent a night here. In the Golden Apostle.
Man Three: Brahms composed a quarter here." p. 12

"Ill: I can help you here, Mister Mayor. Clara loved justice. Most decidedly. Once when they took a beggar away she flung stones at the police.
Mayor: Love of justice. Not bad. It always works. But I think we'd better leave out that bit about the police." p. 15

"Claire Zachanassian: That hurt. You hit one of the straps for my artificial leg." p. 30

"Mayor: Justice can't be bought.
Claire Zachanassian: Everything can be bought." p. 36

"Mayor: Madam Zachanassian: you forget, this is Europe. You forget, we are not savages. In the name of all citizens of Guellen, I reject your offer; and I reject it in the name of humanity. We would rather have poverty than blood on our hands. (Huge applause.)" p. 39

"Ill: And how are my customers going to pay?
Policeman: That doesn't concern the police.
(Stands, takes rifle from back of chair.)
Ill: But it does concern me. Because it's me they're going to pay with." p. 50

"Ill: My life's at stake.
Priest: Your eternal life.
Ill: There's a rise in the standard of living.
Priest: It's the spectre of your conscience rising." p. 57

"Man One: If he tries showing up Clara, and telling lies, claiming she offered something for his death, or some such story, when it was only a figure of speech for unspeakable suffering, then we'll have to step in. Not because of the million. (He spits.) But because of the public indignation. God knows he's already put that sweet Madam Zachanassian through enough. (He looks round.) Is that a way up to the apartment?" pp. 68-69

"Ill: Just what is going on here, in my shop!
(The Guelleners fall back from Schoolmaster to stare at Ill, shocked. Deathly silence.)
Professor! What are you up to on that cask!
(Schoolmaster beams at Ill in happy relief.)
Schoolmaster: The truth, Ill. I'm telling the gentlemen of the Press the truth. Like an archangel I'm telling them, in forceful ringing tones. (Wavers.) Because I'm a humanist, a love of the ancient Greeks, an admirer of Plato." p. 73



"Ill: I made Clara what she is, and I made myself what I am, a failing shopkeeper with a bad name. What shall I do, Schoolmaster? Play innocent? It's all my own work, the Eunuchs, the Butler, the coffin, the million. I can't help myself and I can't help any of you, any more." p. 76

"Schoolmaster: O people of Guellen! Such is the bitter truth! We have connived at injustice! I am of course fully aware of the material possibilities inherent for all of us in a million. Nor am I blind to the fact that poverty is the root of much evil, nay, of great hardship. And yet, and yet: we are not moved by the money (huge applause): we are not moved by ambitious thoughts of prosperity and good living, and luxury: we are moved by this matter of justice and the problem of how to apply it." p. 91

"First Reporter: What's going on here?

(The knot of men opens, loosed. The men assemble quietly in background. Only Doctor remains, kneeling beside a corpse over which is spread, as if in a hotel, a chequered table-cloth. Doctor stands, puts away stethoscope.)

Doctor: Heart attack.

(Silence.)

Mayor: Died of joy.

First Reporter: Died of joy.

Second Reporter: Life writes the most beautiful stories." p. 97



Topics for Discussion

Why does the fact that the townspeople are buying expensive clothing and other goods make Ill suspicious?

If Ill is willing to submit to the decision made by the town, why does he refuse to kill himself?

Does Claire's lifestyle make her happy?

How do the townspeople justify their actions?

Why do the townspeople always identify their values as "Western?"

Describe the significance of the play's similarities to a Greek tragedy.

Does killing Ill heal Claire's broken heart?