

# DRAMA AND THEATRE

# The Visit

## – Friedrich Dürrenmatt





# The Visit

by *Friedrich Dürrenmatt*

**The Visit by Friedrich Dürrenmatt is set in the impoverished town of Guellen. (Guellen means liquid manure.)**

## Summary

The opening scene is set on the town's railway station as the occupants of the town are eagerly awaiting the arrival of Claire Zachanassion, a world famous millionairess. They bemoan their sad state of affairs as Guellen, once a well renowned place, is bankrupt and desperate. We learn that Claire Zachanassion actually grew up in Guellen and the Mayor says that Claire is now their only hope. Alfred III, a popular resident, was her childhood sweetheart and there is high expectation that III will get Claire to "cough up her millions." Alfred III is expected to be the Mayor's successor.

Claire makes a visually impressive entrance, accompanied by her entourage, including her seventh husband. She immediately makes a disparaging remark, calling Guellen a "wretched dump". She proceeds to hand three thousand to the ticket inspector amidst murmuring approval from everyone. A seemingly embarrassed III presents himself to Claire, and they exchange pleasantries until Claire suddenly insults him saying, "You've grown fat. And grey. And drink-sodden." She then reveals that she herself has an artificial leg and introduces III to her seventh husband. She proceeds to announce her desire to visit her old trysting haunts with III whilst her luggage and a coffin are unloaded from the train to be taken to the Golden Apostle Inn where she will reside during her stay.

The scene changes to the interior of the Golden Apostle, a threadbare and dusty environment. The Schoolmaster and the Mayor share their thoughts on Claire's visit and the Schoolmaster expresses his horror at seeing Claire disembarking from the train, saying that she reminds him of an avenging Greek goddess. The policeman joins them and they drink a toast to III and the potential success of his mission.

The woodland scene in Konrad's Village wood follows with the scene being set by four citizens of Guellen representing the trees. Claire and Ill reminisce about the old days and their courting. It is revealed that she was seventeen and he was not quite twenty when he married Matilda Blumhard who owned the little general store, whilst Claire ended up becoming a prostitute and was rescued by the wealthy Zachanassian. Towards the end of this scene, Ill takes Claire's hand, which is also artificial, as she says she is "unkillable".

Claire and Ill have returned to the Golden Apostle when there is a celebration on behalf of Claire's return to her home town. Claire meets Ill's wife Matilda, whilst the Doctor reveals his consternation as he says that Claire's jokes chill him "to the marrow". Claire then states that she is getting a divorce and is going to marry a German film star, adding that she had always dreamt as a child of getting married in Guellen Cathedral. After the Mayor's grandiose speech to Claire, she announces that she is ready to give Guellen a million. Five hundred thousand to the town and five hundred thousand to be shared amongst the families. However there is one condition. She states she is "buying herself justice". The Mayor tells her that is impossible. However, Claire's Butler steps forward and reveals that he was formerly the Lord Chief Justice in Guellen and a long time ago he had a paternity claim to arbitrate. Claire had brought the case against Ill who denied he was the father of her love child and paid two witnesses to deny the paternity. It transpires that these two witnesses are Koby and Loby, blind eunuchs, now part of Claire's entourage, who chant together saying that Alfred Ill bribed them. Ill shouts out his outrage and Claire states her price. "A million for Guellen if someone kills Alfred Ill." The Mayor grandly tells her that this offer is rejected as they would rather "have poverty than blood on our hands". Claire simply says that she will wait.

Ill watches the procession of wreaths that are brought every day from the station to the Golden Apostle from his shop window. Customers are buying provisions from his store, asking for the bill to be put on account. Ill expresses his surprise that he has had no customers so such a long time and now they are flocking in. Meanwhile, Claire is seen sitting on the balcony surveying to the town. Ill suddenly notices that all the customers in his shop are all wearing new yellow shoes. They tell him they got these on account as well. Ill reacts with fear and outrage,

accusing them all of asking for more expensive tobacco and milk, demanding, "How are you going to pay?"

Ill visits the Policeman and demands the arrest of Claire for incitement to murder. He tells Ill that that is ridiculous and no one is pointing a gun at him. Ill sees that the policeman is also wearing new yellow shoes. The policeman receives a phone call from Claire and it is revealed that Claire's black panther has escaped from the Golden Apostle. He loads his gun.

Next, Ill visits the Mayor, who is smoking a new and expensive brand of tobacco, with his new silk tie and new shoes. Ill demands protection and the Mayor tells him to go to the police. Ill then demands the arrest of Claire. The Mayor tells him that he did bribe two witnesses and cause Claire's temporary ruin. He says Ill has no moral right to demand the arrest of Claire and that he will now not be eligible to be the next Mayor. Ill tells him that he has already been condemned to death.

Ill visits the Priest who tells him that he should be troubled by his soul's immortality. As the church bells begin to toll, the Priest suddenly flings himself onto Ill, begging him to flee Guellen. Meanwhile, Claire's pet panther has been shot dead outside Ill's shop.

Ill begins to make his way to the railway station with his suitcase. The citizens of Guellen approach him from all sides, saying they will gladly accompany him to the station. They express their friendship for him, telling him that he has nothing to fear in Guellen. They crowd around him and he asks them to let him pass. He fears that if he gets onto the train someone will stop him. Ill falls to his knees and then collapses on the ground, crying that he is lost. The crowd disappears leaving him alone.

Claire has now married her eighth husband in Guellen Cathedral and has retired to Petersens' Barn. She is visited by the Doctor and the Schoolmaster who reveal that the citizens have drawn up huge debts. They try to strike a business deal by asking her to buy up the factories and industries of Guellen to invest in the town. To their horror, Claire reveals she already owns all the factories and indeed the whole town and she closed down the factories causing the suffering and poverty.

Ill's shop has a new sign and a new counter, till and new stock. He is upstairs pacing up and down. From the comments from customers, it is clear that the tide is turning against Ill and the citizens feel sorry for the way Claire was treated. Journalists enter the shop and start asking questions about Claire and Ill's story. The drunken Schoolmaster tries to tell the journalists the truth about Claire's visit but the citizens try to stop him. Suddenly Ill enters the shop. There is a deathly silence and Ill tells the schoolmaster to hold his peace. The journalists hear news of Claire having found a new lover and they rush off for a photo opportunity. Left alone, Ill tells the schoolmaster that he is not going to fight anymore. Later, the Mayor arrives and tells Ill there is to be a public meeting that evening to deal with his case. Ill says he will comply with the verdict. The Mayor offers Ill his gun to make things easier for everyone but Ill refuses, saying that they will have to judge and kill him.

After a car ride with his family in his son's brand new car, Ill decides to walk through the woods. Claire enters with her

ninth husband. Roby plays the guitar whilst Claire and Ill are left alone to talk about the child. Ill tells her that he will die this evening and she tells him she will take his body to be buried at Capri. She also tells him that she never stopped loving him but her love became something evil. They say farewell to each other for the final time.

At the public meeting that evening, the place is also filled with journalists. Ill is asked by the Mayor whether he will respect the town's decision to accept the money from Claire. He says he will. The press are asked to go and have tea on the lawn of the Golden Apostle. The doors are locked and the lights dimmed. The Priest offers comfort to Ill. He then walks slowly into a line of silent men who then surround him. When they move away, Ill's body is lying on the floor. It is declared that Ill has died from joy. Claire has Ill's body taken away on a stretcher. She gives the Mayor the cheque for a million. As Claire takes the train to leave Guellen for the last time, the citizens of Guellen, now identified as a chorus, celebrate their growing economy and materialistic gain.



## The author and his influences

Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1921– 1990) was born in Switzerland. He wrote about politics, philosophy as well as writing plays and fiction. He was also a painter. He also wrote a large body of work about theatre and drama. Although he is one of our most important modern dramatists, he is often neglected. He stated that he was not “an existentialist, a nihilist, expressionist or ironist.”

“The Visit” (“Der Besuch der Alten Dame”) written in 1956 is his best known work. Dürrenmatt called it a tragi-comedy. Dürrenmatt was strongly influenced by the Theatre of the Absurd and Classical Greek Tragedy as well as comedy and these influences can clearly be seen in his work, of which “The Visit” is a prime example.

The play lends itself as an ideal vehicle to explore a range of genres such as Greek Tragedy, Revenge Tragedy, Absurdism and Black Comedy. There may even be opportunities for exploring Epic Theatre techniques in response to the play in performance. It also poses great scope for choices regarding the dramatic realisation of Dürrenmatt’s stage settings and performance style.

This trailer for a film version of the play is worth watching, although the 1964 film version gives the plot a happy ending after Dürrenmatt had sold the rights. He never saw the film. The full film version is also available to view on YouTube. It does veer off the original text but some key scenes are worth watching.

There are also many school/college performances of the play on YouTube but quality of dramatic realisation cannot be guaranteed!

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Y681DYBXec](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Y681DYBXec)

## Exploring the play

Students will explore the creative possibilities of directing and staging *The Visit*. This will be assessed through a written exam but the play needs to be explored practically in lessons. Focusing on the role of the director, students will analyse and deconstruct the text and explore how any of its scenes can be staged and performed for an audience. They will analyse and interpret this performance text in depth, making decisions about which theatrical methods/devices could be used, together with the study of the relationships between the characters and how they could be realised in performance.

## Key themes

Many of Dürrenmatt’s reoccurring themes of justice, revenge, greed, corruption together with fate/retribution are present here. All are inherently linked with the influencing genres/theatrical styles.

### • Justice and revenge

These two themes are inextricably linked to the dramatic action of the play. Claire says she is “buying herself justice”. Like her artificial body parts, she is fixed and unmoving in her relentless perusal of her lifelong mission. She is, thus, linked to the embodiment of the avenging angel, as she sits on the balcony of the Golden Apostle, observing events unfold below. You can clearly see the Classical Greek hallmarks, with Claire identified as Clotho by the schoolmaster, “spinning destiny’s webs herself”. Dürrenmatt says that Claire can literally afford to play this part because she simply has the money and thus the power to do so. Claire’s revenge is sought on Ill in the form of justice and is also linked to Ill through the theme of retribution. This desire for justice is revealed near the end of the play to be based on Claire’s love for Ill which became corrupted. However, Dürrenmatt states that although Claire is wicked she should be played as humanly as possible, “not with anger but with sorrow and humour, for nothing could harm this comedy with a tragic end more than heavy seriousness.”

### • Greed/material corruption/temptation

As Dürrenmatt himself says, The Guelleners are not inherently wicked and greedy, even at the start of Act Two when they start to purchase more expensive goods on account. Since their impoverished condition of life and deprivation of economic growth, the Guelleners’ temptation of new shoes and material goods (especially tobacco and alcohol) slowly spreads through the town, including the Mayor and the Policeman. Despite this, they all continue to steadfastly reject Claire’s offer, even though they are incurring debts. This counterpoint of acquisition and denial create real absurdism and a sense of the impending fate of Ill.

Amongst this growing sense of materialism, it is Ill who realises the outcome before the Guelleners. The Schoolmaster is an embodiment of this realisation as he states he knows that he too will succumb as his “faith in humanity is powerless to stop it.” It is interesting to see how Ill’s own family are not insusceptible to temptation, despite hoping that things will turn out alright for Ill.

Even once the citizens have voted to accept Claire's offer, it is, "Not for the sake of the money." Their pervading temptation of acquisition achieves its triumph in the final scene where the citizens embody a powerful Chorus celebrating their excess of wealth as they chant, "Protect all our sacred possessions".

- **Fate/retribution**

One could argue that Alfred III represents the archetypal Greek tragic figure who falls from his popular and apparently assured status (Hubris) as a citizen of Guellen at the start of the play due to the fatal error of judgement he made in his youth. However, it is society that determines III's fate. III reaches his state of Anagnorisis (a moment of realisation of the truth/ recognition of impending fate) in Act Three when he tells the Schoolmaster to hold his peace. His acceptance of his forthcoming death gives him a sense of calm resignation and indeed moral superiority as he refuses to take his own life. He will not give the Guelleners that satisfaction. He achieves his greatness through his death counterpointed with the spiritual and moral death of the Guelleners.

- **Black comedy/absurdism**

Dürrenmatt used Black Comedy to explore serious issues and he believed that human behaviour can be explored through comedy. The black comedic overtones in the play are expressed through visual aspects as well as creating irony in the dialogue. Both serve to create comedy within a context that is potentially tragic.

The arrival of the black coffin and the daily procession of funeral wreaths are potent visual images. Claire's artificial limbs also add to the dark and slightly sinister aspects that the play evokes. Also, the use of irony in the dialogue creates a dark comedic atmosphere. III himself laughs unknowingly at Claire's ironic questions to the Policeman and the Priest in Act One is potentially tragic in its irony. Claire has a dry, and in hindsight an ironical, darkly knowing sense of humour which creates an uncomfortable comedic effect for the audience.

The plot itself and the dramatic focus of scenes are Absurdist in their very nature, where we see, "Man as lost in the world, all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (Eugene Ionesco). The dialogue and dramatic action promote Absurdist notions. For example, III's various meetings with the Policeman, Mayor and Priest are absurd at their very core due to the ridiculous nature of the encounters. This statement which typifies III's plight coupled together with his inevitable death creates an inevitable and wholly engrossing coupling of Greek Tragedy and the Absurdist world.

## Performance characteristics and staging requirements of the text

The staging/design requirements offer imaginative challenges. Naturalistic, abstract, stylised, notions of Classical Greek Theatre or Epic theatre styles could all be equally valid choices. Dürrenmatt also sets the play in "The Present" which gives scope for a wide variety of possible choices. Students could consider a range of historical, social, cultural contexts in which to set the play which could create innovative resonances for a potential audience.

Dürrenmatt was especially influenced in the visual arts and this is most evident in the attention to detail that he provides in the stage settings for scenes. He desired that the transitions between scenes should happen, "without pause or curtain..." He also states that scenes like the car scene can be set, "simply and for what preference with a stage vehicle, equipped only with what the action requires." So careful attention needs to be paid to the staging style and transitions between scenes.

## Common misconceptions or difficulties students may have

The main misconception is that a set text is not merely regarded as a story on the page. Students will need to be able to analyse the play and be able to offer an analysis as well as a potential dramatic realisation of the play in performance. The Visit offers an imaginative challenge and many opportunities for originality of response.

Due to the range of genres/styles/influences that The Visit encompasses, students will need to be given exploratory tasks (practical and research-based) to develop their own imaginative vision of the play in performance. Students will need to be able to undertake independent research as well as being able to work with others as they study the play. The ability to verbally communicate their ideas in response to the play and translate this understanding into writing will be a vital aspect. Students need to be given opportunities to develop their writing to articulate their response to the text.

## How to approach essay questions in the exam

The exam paper will be asking questions about directorial decisions for the text. Students will be assessed through their knowledge and understanding of how theatre is created on stage.

A specific and accurate application of technical/specialist vocabulary will be vital together with well justified directorial realisations of the play in performance.

Students will need to have in-depth knowledge of the complete text and be able to provide directorial suggestions for set design, costume, visual aspects as well as performance.

## Suggested activities

### Initial explorations of character and plot

This exciting play offers much scope for a wide range of practical strategies to explore.

#### 1. Exploring the character of Claire and her life

In groups, create a sequence of tableaux that depict Claire's life from a young girl to her arrival at Guellen. Ask students to then select the key moments in her life that have the most bearing on the plot of the play. They can create captions for each tableau describing the moment in the present tense (eg: "The blinding of the eunuchs") and then add a quote from the actual text which supports the importance of this moment in her life.

#### 2. Extension Task

Develop this work by presenting counterpointing images: What Claire desired and what actually transpired. For example: Claire had always dreamt of marrying in Guellen Cathedral (based on love) but Ill left her and married Matilda instead (based on his materialistic desires). She wanted children but had hers taken away. These opposing images will help to develop an understanding of Claire's character.

#### 3. Creation of Before Time scenes

There are many references to episodes in the past that can be improvised in groups/whole class. eg:

- Claire tells Ill she is pregnant. What effect does this have on Ill?
- Ill bribing Jacob and Louis with a pint of brandy to lie in court.
- The trial with the bribed witnesses and Ill's statement in court.



#### 4. After Time scene:

The reporters return to make a TV documentary about the town's newly found affluence. Use textual references to inform the students' response. eg: References to places, cultural heritage, historical significance as well as the names of the thriving businesses. What are the Guelleners' plans for the future? Include an interview with the Schoolmaster, the Mayor and Ill's family to help develop an insight into these roles.

## Exploring the play further

### 5. Staging the play: Starting points

Consider the following:

- What are the essential design elements?

eg: How can the Balcony of the Golden Apostle be accommodated on stage?

- What are the textual constraints? Consider entrances/exits. Where have the characters come from? Where do they go? How can the scene be blocked according to the action? Consider use of grouping, levels and proxemics to show the status/relationships between the characters.
- What type of staging style would be most appropriate?
- What advantages/disadvantages does this staging style have when staging the play?
- Discuss the themes of the play. List key moments that link to these themes. How can the significance of these key moments be presented on stage?
- How can the transitions be made between scenes? Remember Dürrenmatt did not want the use of a curtain (or black out).

### 6. Energy Levels in the Play

Explore differing energy levels, e.g. lowest = inert, highest = hysterical. Students could help identify what they consider to be the energy states between these two.

Now play a range of scenes from the text to explore different energy dynamics between the characters. Here are some examples but there are many more possibilities to explore within these examples.

- The opening of Act One: How can the scene have dramatic interest and differing levels of energy? The first section with Men One to Four can be explored with them adopting different energy levels: Bored, sad, hopeful, complaining, depressed. Explore different ways with the text. Then break the first scene into different sections up to Claire's entrance to see where the overall energy levels shift.
- Claire and the Ticket Inspector in Act One. Play the scene with Claire as relaxed, the Ticket Inspector as hysterical. Now make Claire more insistent and the Inspector as fearful.
- Ill talking to the Policeman. Play Ill as passionate and the policeman as indifferent. Now make Ill frightened and the Policeman as quietly threatening. Explore again with Ill's scene with the Mayor.

- Ill with the Priest. Priest as hysterical and Ill as angry. Then the Priest as passionate and Ill as passive.
- Ill on the car ride with his family. Family as optimistic, happy, joyful, passionate, quiet hope. Ill as calm/curious/resigned/indifferent.

This technique can be usefully applied across the whole play to explore a wide range of possibilities.

### 7. Final Sequence of Act Three: Exploring the vocal delivery of the text

Consideration needs to be given as to the vocal dynamics of the Citizens now personified as a Greek Chorus. Discuss:

- Which lines reflect the thoughts of ALL of the Chorus?
- Which lines might only some of them say?
- Which lines might be more individual thoughts?
- Where are there opportunities for vocal counterpoints?

For example:

- A phrase that they all say followed by a solo line
- A quiet, reflective phrase then a loud, angry phrase.
- Which words could be highlighted vocally with emphasis?
- The use of range of vocal tones to show emotions
- The use of a range of differing volumes
- The use of a range of changing tempos/pace/rhythm within the text
- Echoing / repetition of certain phrases.

Consider the groupings on stage. Do they enter as they speak or are they already present on stage? Do they use movement in unison? (for their different Chorus groupings) How can levels and proxemics be used to block the scene on stage? Do they exit at the end? Do they remain on stage at the end? What is the final, lasting image for the audience?

Consider the use of props to illustrate their words: car steering wheels; tennis racquets; books and paintings.



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