Ill, after a period of introspection, concludes that he brought his own misfortune on himself years ago with his mistreatment of Claire. He goes on a ride with his family into the woods, a place of significance for himself and Claire, where she is waiting for him. They talk for a while about their past relationship and what Claire will do with Ill’s body. He leaves for the town hall, where the Mayor has organised a meeting. Reporters from the press have arrived to cover the enrichment of the town – although they are unaware of the conditions attached to Claire’s offer.

After the intention to hold a vote on the proposal is announced by the Mayor, Ill promises to accept the decision of the town. The Mayor implies that Ill could take the decision away from the people by taking matters into his own hands, but Ill refuses, Believing the townspeople should The mayor says that the the townspeople say that Ill died of joy to know that the town would be rescued from its poverty.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this scene?

1. Which husband accompanies Claire into Konrad’s Wood?
   (a) Sixth.
   (b) Seventh.
   (c) Eighth.
   (d) Ninth.

2. What does Claire say happened to the child she claimed was fathered by Ill?
   (a) She is now a successful businesswoman.
   (b) She ran away from home.
   (c) She became an opera singer.
   (d) She died of meningitis.

3. What is the purpose of the meeting held by the Mayor in the Golden Apostle?
   (a) To vote on Claire’s proposal.
   (b) To provide a photo opportunity for the town.
   (c) To execute Ill.
   (d) To begin hotel renovations.

4. Which citizen votes against accepting Claire’s proposal?
   (a) The schoolteacher.
   (b) The policeman.
   (c) The priest.
   (d) No-one.

5. What are Ill’s last words?
   (a) Please don’t.
   (b) Pray for me.
   (c) Pray for Guellen.
   (d) God have mercy.

6. Which citizen strangles Ill?
   (a) The hotel manager.
   (b) The gymnast.
   (c) The schoolteacher.
   (d) The railway conductor.

7. Where does Claire go after Ill’s death?
   (a) Corfu.
   (b) Cairo.
   (c) Capri.
   (d) Colditz.

8. What do the citizens of the town transform into at the end of the play?
   (a) Funeral attendants.
   (b) A Greek chorus.
   (c) Trees.
   (d) Pall bearers.

9. What is the last line of the play?
   (a) Now let us pray.
   (b) Long may she live.
   (c) For Guellen!
   (d) Let us go and enjoy our good fortune.

10. What does Durrenmatt say about the townspeople in his postscript?
    (a) They are not wicked, only weak.
    (b) They should have admitted their intention from the start.
    (c) They should be punished their actions.
    (d) They deserve to be wealthy.
Understanding and Interpretation

1. What do Claire and Ill discuss in Konrad’s Wood? Do you find this scene sad or moving in any way? Explain your response:

2. What is the effect of introducing a radio commentator, announcer and cameraman join the townspeople? What is the role of the press and media during the final act?

3. What point does the schoolmaster try to make to the townspeople in his extended speeches in this section?

4. Examine the dialogue and stage directions of the execution. How might this be rendered ‘dramatically’ onstage?

5. What are Claire and Ill’s last words in the play respectively? Why are their final lines appropriate for each character?
Much of our understanding of tragedy as a dramatic and poetic form comes from Aristotle’s famous study of Greek dramatic art, Poetics, written in his lifetime (384BC – 322BC). The aim of tragedy, he writes, is to bring about a catharsis in the audience. Catharsis is created by witnessing a disastrous reversal of fortune (or peripeteia) for the protagonist character. This ‘disaster’ should arouse feelings – fear, anger, pity – and then ‘purge’ the audience of these feelings. Attending a theatrical performance, therefore, was a physical and emotional experience, not just an intellectual one. You might like to consider how this holds true in the present day: if you’ve ever cried at a sad movie, cheered at a football game, or been gripped at the edge of your seat at the theatre, and left feeling refreshed, energized or awakened, you’ll know what Aristotle meant by catharsis.

The disastrous reversal of fortune, according to Aristotle, should be triggered by some kind of tragic flaw in the protagonist character, who is otherwise noble. In historical Greek tragedies, ‘noble’ was a literal position in society, as the protagonist would be a member of society’s nobility: perhaps a Prince or even King. A huge difference between Greek theatre and modern theatre is that we are now accustomed to seeing common characters onstage as well; nevertheless, the protagonist should have a noble quality to their character and, initially at least, be an admirable person. The tragic flaw (otherwise known as a ‘fatal flaw’ or, technically, hamartia) can come from inside – but may also be influenced by fate, chance coincidence, or simple bad luck. However it comes about, the reversal of fortune results in a fall from grace, in which the character loses high standing and reputation in the eyes of the community.

Before the conclusion of a tragic play, it is important that the protagonist character come to a new understanding about the truth of the situation they find themselves in. They may discover a secret about another character’s identity, role in the plot, or even come to a realization about their own self. This ‘moment of realization’ is called anagnorisis and it is this insight that helps the audience to achieve catharsis.

Aristotle’s Poetics has had a long-lasting and tangible influence on the development of tragedies on stage, including Durrenmatt’s The Visit. Other elements of tragedy identified in Aristotle’s writing include spectacle (such as scenic effects and exaggeration, for instance) and song (or music). However, according to Aristotle, the most important aspect of tragedy is plot. The audience should get the sense that the protagonist character is caught up in a wider world of actions and events. While he may contribute to those events through his acts and mistakes, tragedy is meant to illustrate weighty matters rather than those of individual significance.
Durrenmatt subtitled his play ‘a tragi-comedy’ and it is the ‘tragi-’ part of the subtitle that you should focus on here. Discuss the elements of tragedy as defined by Aristotle and presented in this lesson. Which of these elements are present in *The Visit*? How are they presented? Record your ideas in note form in this table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of Tragedy</th>
<th>Notes on The Visit</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Character of initially high standing</td>
<td>Ill is described as a ‘popular personality’ and Guellen’s ‘most popular citizen.’ Ill is even lined up to be the Mayor’s successor when he retires.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reversal of fortune (<em>peripeteia</em>)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tragic flaw / fatal flaw / <em>hamartia</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fall from grace / loss of standing and reputation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moment of realization (<em>anagnorisis</em>)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of fate or chance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spectacle / Song</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Weighty matters’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Important Theme: Justice

‘We are not moved by the money; we are not moved by ambitious thoughts of prosperity and good living; we are moved by this matter of justice.’

Claire’s quest to win justice for Ill’s betrayal propels the plot of The Visit, and she desires to take Ill’s life (and destroy his reputation) as punishment for his past wrongs. To Claire, justice is the same as ‘revenge’ against Ill’s actions from 45 years ago. Her idea of ‘justice’ is driven by self-interest, Claire feels personally entitled to her revenge. Furthermore, Claire treats justice as a commodity to be bought or sold. When she offers the town a million dollars in exchange for Ill’s death, the Mayor protests that “justice can’t be bought,” but Claire responds: “Everything can be bought.”

As the town turns against him, Ill retreats inward and, in time, accepts his inevitable death as punishment for his betrayal of Claire. “I turned Clara into what she is,” he says, “and myself into what I am, a griny, petty shopkeeper.” Ill stops trying to justify his actions, and he simply acknowledges the wrong he committed years ago. In the end, this sets him apart from his fellow Güelleners, who refuse to ever acknowledge their own moral failings. Despite what he says about himself, Ill undergoes a transformation from ‘a griny, petty shopkeeper’ into someone willing to hold himself to an ideal of justice; when the Mayor suggests that Ill commit suicide and save the town the trouble of having to kill him, he refuses. The town, too, he argues, must assume responsibility for their own actions.

By contrast, for the townspeople, ‘justice’ is an empty word that they easily twist to accommodate their own greed and self-interest. Upon hearing Claire’s offer, the Mayor reminds Claire: “We’re not savages yet. In the name of the town of Güllen, I reject your offer. In the name of humanity. We would rather be poor than have blood on our hands.” This speech, however, is quickly revealed to be empty: it is not long before the townspeople of Güllen begin living above their means, all the while denying that their values have changed or that they intend to satisfy Claire’s conditions for getting the million dollars. Instead, they change their concept of justice in order to fit their actions, rather than acting according to the concept of true justice. In this way, Durrenmatt shows how grandiose and glittering ideals such as ‘justice’ can easily become empty, meaningless words in the mouths of people whose principles can be bought whenever they become inconvenient.

Activity

Write a Learner Portfolio entry about the theme of Justice. Use the following points to structure your response:

- What type of justice does Claire represent? What does justice mean to her?
- What does justice mean to the townspeople? Are they really motivated by justice?
- How does Ill come to understand the meaning of justice?
- To what conclusion about justice does Durrenmatt’s play encourage you to come?