The Visit: Act 1 Scene 2 (To the end: “I'll wait.”)

“I want justice. Justice for a million.”

Claire and Ill arrive at the Village Wood and Petersen's barn, places Claire and Ill made love as youths. She recalls how their relationship ended when Ill married another woman and left her all alone. She left the town and become a prostitute in Hamburg, where she attracted the attention of a rich Armenian, the first of many wealthy husbands. Ill insists that everything turned out for the best.

They leave for The Golden Apostle, where Claire is to be formally introduced to some of the town’s citizens. After hearing the Mayor’s speech properly this time, she says how moved she is to be back at her hometown and promises to give Guellen a million dollars – on one condition. When the townspeople 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. Therefore, she insists that in return for the million… Ill be killed.

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Knowledge Check

How well do you know this scene?

1. What was Claire's maiden name?
   (a) Zachanassian.
   (b) Wascher.
   (c) Bockmann.
   (d) Heimlin.

2. What is Ill's first name in the play?
   (a) Jacob.
   (b) Wilhem.
   (c) Alfred.
   (d) Gustov.

3. Ill used to call Claire "my little" what?
   (a) Cougar.
   (b) Tiger.
   (c) Wildcat.
   (d) Kitten.

4. The sedan chair upon which Claire rides was a gift from whom?
   (a) The American President.
   (b) The British Prime Minister.
   (c) The French President.
   (d) The German President.

5. What animal has Claire brought with her to the town?
   (a) A cougar.
   (b) An ocelot.
   (c) A panther.
   (d) A lion.

6. What is Ill's wife's name?
   (a) Greta.
   (b) Matilda.
   (c) Olietta.
   (d) Hilda.

7. Where was Claire in a plane crash?
   (a) Afghanistan.
   (b) Germany.
   (c) America.
   (d) Iran.

8. Along with Louis Perch, who was the other witness who testified in court many years ago?
   (a) Jacob Poultry.
   (b) Franz Turkey.
   (c) James Perchless.
   (d) Jacob Chicken.

9. What was the year in which the paternity trial took place?
   (a) 1935.
   (b) 1940.
   (c) 1910.
   (d) 1920.

10. Where had Louis Perch emigrated to?
    (a) France.
    (b) America.
    (c) Australia.
    (d) India.
Understanding and Interpretation

1. Why does Claire go to Konrad's Village Wood? What is revealed during her visit there?

2. What does Ill say about his past relationship with Claire and how it ended?

3. What is strange about Claire's body? In what ways is Claire's body symbolic?

4. What strange things does Claire say to some of the people in the town, that are clear examples of foreshadowing her offer at the end of this scene?

5. From Claire's point of view, how does she justify the condition attached to her offer of money to the town and residents?
Dramatic Study: Analepsis

‘We loved each other under these boughs... I was seventeen and you weren’t quite twenty...’

Most of what needs to be known about a character will be revealed in the course of the play; sometimes, however, the material the audience sees on stage is backstory. The literary name for the narration of past events at a later point in the story is analepsis.

Dramatists can present backstory in several ways. The most common is through monologue, where a character tells a story in an extended speech. At times, backstory will be delivered by actually performing incidents from the past, perhaps under different lighting conditions or in a stylized way that makes it clear the events are a flashback. In The Visit, when Claire and Ill recall their past trysts in Konrad’s Wood, Dürrenmatt simply presents their memories in ordinary lines of dialogue between the two.

The Mayor’s speech is an interesting kind of analepsis in that he refers to a past that did not happen at all the way he wants people to think. Both the Mayor and Ill have shown a tendency to romanticize the past – if not outright falsify past events to suit their own agendas. When Ill says to Claire that “it was for your sake that I married Mathilda Blumhard” the audience is entitled to be sceptical about this interpretation of events. Once again, it is Claire who reveals the truth hidden behind all the pretence. On page 35, after listening to the Mayor wax lyrical about her supposed achievements, she quite pointedly says, “As a matter of fact I was somewhat different from the child I seem to be in the mayor’s speech.”

Activity

Examine the play so far, looking for moments where characters consider a past event. How are these events remembered? Do you think the memories are true or nostalgic, romanticized versions of the past? Complete this table with your findings and thoughts:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romanticized Past</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Goethe spent a night here, in the Golden Apostle. Brahms composed a quartet here.</td>
<td>The men on the platform remember the ‘golden days’ when famous people used to frequent the town. Goethe is a writer and Brahms a classical composer. These names imply the town was an inspiration for people in the Arts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Important Theme: *Money can't buy you love... (or can it?)*

‘I’m giving you a million and I’m buying myself justice.’

The plot and action of *The Visit* depends upon the relationship between Claire and Ill, and the youthful love they shared which was broken by Ill. Because of this one event in the past, both characters have become warped and embittered about their past and present relationships. After they separated, Ill married a shopkeeper for her “little general store” and Claire became a prostitute before marrying a series of men that she clearly neither loves nor respects. While the love between Ill and Claire may have been genuine, the end of their relationship irrevocably twisted up the idea of love with the quest for money for both these characters.

Like any other value in the world of *The Visit*, romantic love is no match for money. **Greed easily triumphs over true love.** In fact, the foundational event of the play, and the motivation for Claire’s revenge, is Ill’s forty-five-year-old decision to leave the pregnant Claire and instead marry Matilda for her money. Ill’s choice forced Claire into prostitution to support herself. She came to think of sex (which she nostalgically describes in romantic terms: “we loved each other under these boughs... among these toadstools on the moss”) as something done for profit: “I married old Zachanassian with his millions... he found me in a brothel.” Claire’s love was ‘bought’ by her first husband, and Claire has subsequently ‘bought’ her marriages since, working through seven husbands whom she considered to be disposable, indicated by the way she has named her seventh husband after the source of his wealth: “*Tobacco Plantations.*”

Despite all of her marriages, however, Claire never ceased to be haunted by her love for Ill. Her desire to kill him is, in part, an act of revenge for his betrayal, but it is also more complicated than that. She describes her quest almost as an act of love; she wants him dead not because she hates him, but because her love for him has warped into a desire to possess him completely: to manufacture his demise. She says that she wants “*accounts between us settled*” words that conflate love and money; and she declares that she’s ‘*turning back time*,’ suggesting she wants to reclaim her fate from that moment, forty-five years ago, when Ill made a decision that was out of her control.

**Activity**

Claire’s promise to turn back time (“*A moment ago you wanted time turned back... well I’m turning it back now*”) suggests that her motivation is more than simple revenge. She wants to reclaim control over her fate, control that Ill took away from her when he made the decision to end their relationship all those years ago. Throughout Act 1, Claire has been linked with ‘Fate’ on more than one occasion. Do you recognise the following allusions and references? Research and note down your findings:

- Medea:

- Clotho:

- ‘That old lady in black robes... Like one of the Fates...’:

- Lais (of Corinth):
The Visit takes place in Switzerland about a decade after WWII. During the war, Switzerland remained a neutral country - that is, one that neither officially supported nor opposed the Axis powers. Swiss neutrality was touted as a means to promote peace and humanitarian values, but, in Dürrenmatt’s opinion, it was merely a euphemism for Switzerland’s complicity in the rise of Nazism. For example, Switzerland deported its Jewish citizens, closed its borders to migrant Jews fleeing the Nazis, interned and imprisoned hundreds of Allied soldiers during the war, and accepted looted gold from German forces.

In Dürrenmatt’s view, Swiss neutrality was not a beacon of European humanism amidst the darkness of the war, but rather a deeply inhuman and hypocritical stance. The Visit presents Dürrenmatt’s criticisms in thinly veiled terms, representing a community that, like Switzerland, abandons its moral convictions in the interest of material and political gain. Nowhere is this clearer than in the bombastic mayor’s speech that closes Act One. Met with thunderous applause, the mayor unequivocally rejects Claire’s offer on the grounds of humanism: he is strongly defending European values against Claire’s immoral offer. On the face of it, the mayor is acting in a way that the IB Student Learner Profile would call: principled.

However, as we have already learned, in the town of Guellen, nothing is as it seems. Appearance and reality are inverted and characters do not always say what they mean or do what they say. Once the curtain raises on Act 2, the audience will certainly be asking whether the position of the mayor (‘We would rather have poverty than blood on our hands’) might succumb to the temptation of money dangled in front of the townspeople by Claire. Her final words in this scene (‘I’ll wait’) imply she already knows how powerful a lure money can be – and how quickly the mayor’s principled stand might be abandoned.

Discuss the Learner Profile trait of ‘principled’ in light of the actions and events of Act 1. For example, while Alfred III is described as an upstanding member of the town, has he always acted in a principled way? What about Claire herself? Talk about the trait of ‘principled’ with a partner and share your thoughts with the class.

Friedrich Durrenmatt himself unquestionably demonstrates the IB Student Learner Profile trait of principled. Take his stance on his native country, Switzerland, as a case in point. His relationship to his native land is not easy. While he loved the geographical attributes of the landscape, he was dismayed by the political hypocrisy of the government and found himself at odds with some citizens; one of his early plays was roundly booed when first performed in public. He observed and criticized the Swiss government’s official declarations of neutrality during the Second World War, angry that his native land did not do more to uphold humanist values especially in light of their unwillingness to help Jewish refugees.