The Visit: Claire's Arrival (Act 1)

"It is Guellen… I recognise the wretched dump."

Act 1 opens at Guellen's train station, where the townspeople lament the town's economic decline and pin their hopes on the return of millionaire Claire Zachanassian, once a local girl. Claire arrives in spectacular fashion, stopping a train that would normally pass through the town. Accompanied by her latest husband, her butler, a retinue of servants, and copious luggage, she immediately establishes herself as a most unusual arrival.

Claire is greeted by Alfred Ill, her former lover. As they revisit places from their youth, memories of their past relationship resurface. Claire recalls how Ill abandoned her and married someone else, leaving her alone and disgraced, while Ill insists that the past should be left behind. Later, at a civic reception, Claire appears ready to rescue the struggling town, promising a gift of one million dollars. However, her generosity comes with a shocking condition: Claire declares that she will provide the money only if the town delivers her version of justice. The act ends with Guellen's citizens confronted by a proposition that will test both their morality… and their desperation.

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this scene?

1. What does the name of the town (Guellen) mean in German?
(a) Manure
(b) Revenge
(c) Poison
(d) Love

2. Who did Claire once have 'do her portrait'?
(a) Zimt
(b) Picasso
(c) Klimt
(d) Renoir

3. What is the name of the oil company Claire owns?
(a) Getty Oil
(b) Armenian Oil
(c) American Oil
(d) Gulf Oil

4. What is the name of the hotel in the town square?
(a) The Golden Apostle
(b) The Quartz Inn
(c) The Garden Tree
(d) The Goethe Hotel

5. How old is Ill at the start of the play?
(a) 65
(b) 75
(c) 85
(d) 105

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

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

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

9. Along with Louis Perch, who testified in court against Claire many years ago?
(a) John Poultry
(b) Franz Turkey
(c) Andrew Gander
(d) Jacob Chicken

10. In what year did the paternity trial take place?
(a) 1935.
(b) 1940.
(c) 1910.
(d) 1920.

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Describe the town of Guellen. How does it compare to other towns in the region? What kind of scene does Durrenmatt establish at the opening of the play?

2. Durrenmatt uses the technique of *delayed entrance* before his main character arrives (meaning the audience hear about Claire's character before meeting her). What effect does this technique create?

3. Claire's arrival at the town is the *inciting incident* that drives the action of the play. How does Durrenmatt create maximum impact with her appearance on stage? What do you notice about the manner of her arrival, and the attitude of characters such as the Ticket Master and the Mayor?

4. Claire is accompanied by a bizarre retinue of butler, servants, and a seventh (!) husband. What function do these characters serve in the play? How does the way they are depicted (such as their names or way of speaking) suggest ideas?

5. By the end of Act 1, what is your reading and interpretation of Claire Zachanassian? For instance, what are her attitudes towards (e.g.) money, morality, truth, and justice?

Dramatic Study: *Exposition and Stage Directions*



Concept art by Scott Pask (left) became the set of The Visit *at the Lyceum theatre in New York, 2015.*

The way a dramatist opens a play is extremely important. He or she is inviting you into the ideas and action and situating you in the world of the play. Because a theatre audience does not typically read a play, the playwright's tools are different to those of a novelist who may write paragraphs of description at the beginning of chapter 1. Instead, the dramatist has the audience see and hear expository information. Imagine sitting in a theatre as the house lights go down and the stage lights come up. What do you see first? Often the set design and lighting has an impact. *The Visit* opens on the platform of Guellen, a rundown and dilapidated town in the middle of a severe economic downturn. In the opening stage directions, Dürrenmatt instructs the set designer of *The Visit* to include certain features such as *"a rusty signal cabin," "a barren little building,"* and *"ramshackle station buildings."* All should be *"depicted in bare outline"*.

As well as visual information, the audience receives auditory information. They may hear sound effects connected to the weather or background action. The very first line of Dürrenmatt's play is a stage direction instructing the sound designer to provide the *"clangor of railway-station bell"* before the curtain rises. This immediately draws attention to the railway, which becomes an important symbol throughout the play. Trains repeatedly pass through Guellen without stopping, suggesting that prosperity, opportunity, and progress have passed the town by. Long before the characters describe their poverty, the audience can hear and imagine the community's isolation from the wider world. Importantly, certain characters may already be onstage when the curtain rises or enter shortly afterwards. Their dialogue often provides crucial background information. Older plays sometimes used prologues or a Chorus to explain the story directly to the audience. In *The Visit*, Dürrenmatt hearkens back to this tradition by opening with five unnamed townspeople discussing Guellen's economic decline as they wait for Claire Zachanassian's arrival. Through their conversation, the audience quickly learns about the town's desperate circumstances and the hopes that have been invested in Claire's return.

All together, the expository stage directions and opening dialogue of *The Visit* establish the play's setting, introduce its central conflict, and create the sense of desperation that drives the action. Before Claire even appears on stage, the audience already understands that Guellen is a town in crisis and that its citizens are willing to place extraordinary hopes in a wealthy saviour. This foundation helps explain why Claire's shocking offer later exerts such a powerful influence on the townspeople.

Analytical Writing Practice

Choose one or more features of Dürrenmatt's exposition, such as the stage directions, sound effects, setting, symbolism of the trains, or opening dialogue. Explain how this dramatic choice influences the audience's first impressions of Guellen and prepares them for the events that follow.

Important Characters: *The Mayor and The Schoolmaster*

'This is no time for wild enthusiasm, the mood you want is an inward, an almost tearful sympathy for one of our children.'

From the opening of *The Visit*, the Mayor presents himself as Guellen's responsible and principled leader. He's a devoted family man who organises Claire's reception at the train station. Yet Dürrenmatt quickly suggests that the Mayor is more concerned with appearances than with the truth. As the townspeople prepare for Claire Zachanassian's arrival, he oversees a series of increasingly desperate attempts to impress the millionaire, from the hastily painted welcome signs to the rehearsed speeches and performances. Although he urges everyone to be *"relaxed"* and *"sincere,"* his own behaviour reveals that the town's welcome is carefully staged rather than genuine.

This concern with appearances is reflected in the Mayor's use of *analepsis*, the narration of past events at a later point in the story. In *The Visit*, Dürrenmatt usually reveals the past through dialogue, particularly when Claire and Ill recall their former relationship in Konrad's Wood. The Mayor's speech is a more unusual example of analepsis because, rather than simply recalling past events, he rewrites history to suit what he perceives to be the pressing needs of the present. For example, he changes Claire's troubled youth into a flattering story of intelligence, virtue, and generosity, creating a version of history designed to persuade her to donate money to the town.

Claire immediately points out the disparity between this public performance and reality. After listening to the Mayor's speech, she drily observes that she was *"somewhat different from the child I seem to be in the mayor's speech."* Her comment reveals how willing the Mayor is to distort the truth when it serves his interests. In many ways, Claire's early arrival has already exposed this tendency. The unfinished decorations, missing performers, and shared hat show up the pretence behind Guellen's welcome. Through the Mayor, Dürrenmatt introduces one of the play's most important ideas: people often disguise their true motives behind respectable words. As the play progresses, the Mayor's growing willingness to sacrifice principle for prosperity will show just how dangerous such deception can become.

While the Mayor presents Claire as a benevolent saviour, by contrast, one character seems able to see truths that others prefer to ignore: the Schoolmaster. He senses a more troubling aspect of her arrival, describing her as *"that old lady in black robes"* and comparing her to *"an avenging Greek goddess,"* suggesting that she resembles a supernatural force of justice rather than a generous philanthropist. His remark that *"her name shouldn't be Claire; it should be Clotho"* alludes to one of the Three Fates of Greek mythology, figures who controlled the destiny of human beings. Whereas the Mayor tries to construct a flattering and reassuring appearance, the Schoolmaster glimpses the reality hidden beneath. His description foreshadows that Claire has not returned simply to save Guellen but to pass judgement on it, making him one of the first characters to understand the true significance of her visit. In this way, the Schoolmaster acts as an insightful foil, observant in a way that contrasts with the Mayor's self-serving optimism.

Activity

Throughout Act 1, the Mayor and citizens work hard to present an image of themselves and their town. Yet Dürrenmatt often introduces small details that create doubt and suspicion in the audience's mind. Certain objects seem oddly out of place. Some figures, particularly the Schoolmaster, notice things that others would rather ignore. These moments act as *foreshadowing*, hinting at developments that will become important later in the play.

Skim and scan Act 1, looking for these 'cracks in the facade.' What details might make an audience suspicious that there is more going on beneath the surface of the play?