The Visit: Money Vs. Morality (Act 2)

"She's inciting the people of our town to kill me."

Act Two begins and though the town initially supports Ill, the audience can already see cracks appearing in its moral resolve. The day after Claire's announcement, the citizens begin buying luxuries on credit: better clothes, finer food, and expensive shoes. They would hardly do so unless they expected money to arrive soon, and with Guellen's bleak economic prospects, it is obvious they are counting on Claire's offer. Ill reaches the same conclusion, and his anxiety begins to grow.

Seeking reassurance, he visits the Mayor, who has publicly rejected Claire's proposal. Yet the Mayor, like everyone else, has quietly upgraded his standard of living and dismisses Ill's concerns. He even begins to suggest that Claire may have a point about Ill's treatment of her. The Priest proves equally unsettling. Though he represents spiritual authority, he too is caught between principle and self-interest, insisting that Ill has nothing to fear. Hearing everyone profess their support while witnessing evidence to the contrary, Ill decides to flee Guellen. He heads for the train station, only to find a crowd waiting to see him off...

Knowledge Check

How well do you know this scene?

1. What is Ill's son's name?
(a) Jacob.
(b) Eryk.
(c) Hans.
(d) Karl.

2. Where was Claire's first husband from?
(a) Australia
(b) Armenia
(c) Argentina
(d) America

3. Who was Claire's third husband?
(a) King Ferdinand
(b) Duke of Winchester
(c) Count Holk
(d) Count Zachman

4. How does Claire drink her whiskey?
(a) As a Manhattan
(b) Shaken
(c) Neat
(d) On ice

5. How do the townspeople begin buying things in Act 2?
(a) On credit
(b) With silver
(c) With cash
(d) With gold

6. What does the mayor have sitting on his desk?
(a) A revolver
(b) A shotgun
(c) A dagger
(d) A sword

7. Of whom does Claire say "They need me, and I need them"?
(a) The children
(b) The reporters
(c) Her husbands
(d) Roby and Toby

8. Who has acquired a washing machine?
(a) The Heimbergers.
(b) The Police Headquarters.
(c) The Siemethofers.
(d) Ill's family

9. What does the Priest say he is about to perform?
(a) A baptism
(b) A mass
(c) A marriage
(d) A funeral

10. What does Ill say the people are hunting him like?
(a) A wild animal
(b) A panther
(c) A rabid dog
(d) A criminal

Understanding and Interpretation

1. Which members of Ill's family do we meet at the start of Act 2? What do they do? How do they treat Ill?

2. Durrenmatt fills Act 2 with *symbols*, both obvious (the coffin anybody?) and subtle. What uses of symbolism can you find in Act 2?

3. To what extent do you agree denial, or the evasion of responsibility, is what's motivating the townspeople? What evidence can you provide for your answer? Which character's responses most clearly illustrate this theme?

4. Where is Claire throughout this act? What does she speak about? How do Claire's dialogue and actions relate to the rest of the act?

5. Act 2 closes on a chilling scene that feels like something out of a horror film. How has Durrenmatt managed the escalation of tension in the play to this moment?

Dramatic Study: *Verbal and Visual Irony*

"You're wearing new shoes. New yellow shoes."

Throughout *The Visit*, Dürrenmatt makes extensive use of irony, or the contrast between appearance and reality. Characters frequently say one thing while meaning another, creating moments of verbal irony that are often amusing for the audience but at the same time deeply disturbing. From the beginning of the play, for example, the citizens of Guellen insist that they would never sacrifice a fellow human being for money, even as their actions increasingly suggest otherwise.



The Remington Typewriter is an example of visual irony. Even as the Mayor says to Ill, "You're forgetting you're in Guellen. A city of Humanist traditions. Goethe spent a night here. Brahms composed a quartet here. We owe allegiance to our lofty heritage…" a man comes in to deliver his new – and expensive – purchase. Dürrenmatt uses irony to imply that even those who are supposed to uphold Humanist principles cannot resist the temptation of greed and selfishness.

Dürrenmatt also employs visual irony, where something's appearance contradicts its true significance. Claire Zachanassian is perhaps the play's most striking example. Physically, she appears almost artificial: her body is a collection of prosthetic limbs, including an ivory hand and a wooden leg. Her white wedding dress seems equally contradictory, given her history as a former prostitute. Yet despite this appearance of artifice, Claire is the only major character who consistently tells the truth. She openly admits her desire to see Ill killed and never disguises her motives. In a play filled with deception and self-delusion, the most artificial-looking character proves to be its most honest.

Irony becomes especially important in Act 2. As Ill becomes increasingly isolated, he begins to notice subtle changes in the behaviour of the townspeople. Customers purchase expensive goods on credit, families want luxuries they could not previously afford, and more and more citizens appear wearing expensive yellow shoes. Publicly, everyone continues to insist that Claire's offer has been rejected and that no harm will come to Ill. Visually, however, the audience can see evidence that the town is already spending money it does not yet possess. The yellow shoes therefore become an ironic symbol: while the townspeople claim to have resisted Claire's temptation, their behaviour suggests they have already accepted her bargain in principle. The irony between what the Guelleners say and what they do becomes increasingly obvious, creating both comedy as the audience watches a community deceive itself… and tension as they wonder where this all might end.

Analytical Writing Practice

In Act 2, Dürrenmatt creates irony by placing what the audience sees in conflict with what the characters say. While the townspeople continue to insist that they would never kill Ill for money, visual details on stage (for instance: guns, yellow shoes, construction plans on the walls of the Mayor's office) increasingly suggest otherwise.

Choose one example of visual or verbal irony from Act 2 and write an analytical paragraph explaining how it develops the play's themes. Pay particular attention to the conflict between dialogue and stagecraft, setting, or stage directions. What do the characters claim to believe, and what evidence on stage suggests a different reality? Explain how Dürrenmatt uses irony to imply Guellen's moral decline for the play's audience.

Literary Context: *Post-World War Two Europe*

"You can get anything you want with money."

The Visit takes place about a decade after the Second World War and was first performed in 1956. During the war, Switzerland remained officially neutral, neither openly supporting nor fighting against Nazi Germany. Swiss neutrality was often presented as a commitment to peace and humanitarian values, but Dürrenmatt viewed this idealized picture with suspicion. He was troubled by Switzerland's treatment of Jewish refugees, its willingness to do business with Nazi Germany, and its banks' acceptance of looted Nazi gold. In his view, Swiss neutrality was not always a beacon of European humanism, but sometimes a way of avoiding responsibility while benefiting from injustice.

This scepticism helps explain *The Visit*. Although Guellen is a fictional town, it can be read as a microcosm of post-war Europe, while its citizens represent ordinary Europeans who like to think of themselves as civilized, moral people. At the end of Act 1, the Mayor speaks in exactly these terms when he rejects Claire's offer. Outraged, he declares, *"We would rather have poverty than blood on our hands."* The speech is met with applause and appears to be a triumphant defence of humanist values against Claire's attempt to place a price on human life. However, as we have already learned, in Guellen nothing is quite as it seems. Appearance and reality are often inverted, and characters frequently say one thing while doing another. Act 2 immediately begins to undermine the Mayor's noble declaration. While the townspeople continue to insist that Claire's offer has been rejected, they begin purchasing luxuries on credit and wearing expensive new yellow shoes. The audience sees their behaviour changing long before they are willing to admit it themselves.

Dürrenmatt extends this criticism through the town's leading figures. The Mayor, the Priest, and the Policeman all represent institutions that claim to uphold moral order. It's no accident that there's one town priest, one store owner, one policeman, one butcher, and so on. Each man reassures Ill that he has nothing to fear while simultaneously refusing to confront what is happening around them. The Policeman dismisses Ill's concerns. The Mayor speaks grandly about Guellen's traditions and values. Even the Priest, whom Ill approaches for spiritual guidance, offers little comfort and ultimately fails to take a stand. Their behaviour reflects a recurring concern in Dürrenmatt's writing: the tendency of individuals and institutions to hide behind rhetoric, ceremony, or idealistic language rather than confront or admit to uncomfortable truths. An important aspect of Act 2 is therefore denial. The townspeople deny that Claire's money is influencing them, even as they begin spending it in advance. The Mayor denies that Guellen's principles are changing. The Priest denies Ill's fears. Like Claire herself, the audience watches as a community that prided itself on its morality gradually finds ways to justify the unjustifiable – all because money is up for grabs!

In light of the play's historical context, Dürrenmatt suggests that the greatest moral failures are rarely committed by people who think of themselves as villains. Rather, they happen when ordinary citizens convince themselves that their principles remain intact even as they abandon them. First staged a decade after the horrors of the Holocaust came to light, with audiences reckoning with the knowledge that Europeans had indeed acted like *"savages"* while ordinary people looked the other way or refused to admit what was happening in their own towns and cities, through the slow transformation of Guellen in Act 2, Dürrenmatt challenges the comforting belief that civilized societies will always act humanely when their values are put to the test.

Activity

The Swiss public broadcaster SWI has an excellent article on the continuing significance of *The Visit*. It discusses why the play still resonates internationally and includes useful commentary on greed, complicity, and the symbolism of Guellen. Use the link on the class blog or search 'Swissinfo, The Global Significance of Dürrenmatt's *The Visit'* to find this source and conduct some wider reading and research.