

The Visit

by Friedrich Dürrenmatt · Language: EN

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Overview

The Visit (Der Besuch der alten Dame) is a tragicomedy in three acts by Swiss playwright Friedrich Dürrenmatt, first published in 1956. The play is set in the impoverished town of Gullen, which is offered a fortune by its richest citizen, the elderly billionaire Claire Zachanassian, on one condition: the townspeople must kill Alfred Ill, the man who jilted her decades ago. Claire arrives with her entourage, including a black panther and two eunuchs, and presents her demand as a form of justice. The townspeople initially reject the idea, but as Claire's wealth begins to influence their daily lives—through new shoes, food, and credit—their moral resolve erodes. The play explores how economic desperation can corrupt collective morality, and how justice can be perverted into revenge.

The story arc follows the town's gradual capitulation to Claire's terms. Alfred Ill, who initially dismisses Claire's threat, slowly realizes his fate as the community turns against him. The mayor, the priest, and the doctor all rationalize their complicity, and the town's collective guilt is masked by a pretense of fairness. In the end, Ill accepts his death as a form of atonement, and the townspeople, after a staged vote, kill him. Claire receives her payment and leaves, taking Ill's body with her. The play ends with the town's new prosperity, but the moral cost is evident.

The Visit is a powerful critique of capitalism, justice, and human weakness. It remains relevant for its exploration of how easily principles can be traded for material gain. Dürrenmatt's dark humor and grotesque characters make the play both entertaining and unsettling. It is a classic of 20th-century theater, often studied for its commentary on post-war European society and the dangers of moral compromise.

Key Takeaways

- Economic desperation can erode moral principles, as seen when the townspeople of Gullen gradually accept Claire's demand for Alfred Ill's death.
- Justice can be perverted into revenge when personal grievances are backed by immense wealth.
- Collective guilt is often rationalized through a pretense of fairness, as the townspeople stage a vote to justify their actions.
- The play warns against the dehumanizing effects of materialism, where human life is valued only in monetary terms.

- Individuals may accept their fate when they recognize the inevitability of social pressure, as Alfred Ill does in his final hours.
- Dürrenmatt uses grotesque elements, such as Claire's artificial limbs and her black panther, to highlight the absurdity of moral decay.
- The Visit demonstrates that power can corrupt not only individuals but entire communities, leading to a loss of shared values.

Chapter Summaries

Act One

The town of Gullen is in ruins, and its citizens await the arrival of Claire Zachanassian, a billionaire who was born there. The mayor, the teacher, and the townspeople hope she will donate money to revive the town. Claire arrives with her entourage, including her butler Bobby, her two eunuchs, and a black panther. She reveals her past with Alfred Ill, who jilted her when she was young and pregnant. Claire announces she will give the town a billion dollars, but only if they kill Alfred Ill. The townspeople initially refuse, but Claire begins to buy up the town's businesses and extend credit, subtly changing the town's economy and mindset.

Act Two

The town's prosperity begins to grow as Claire's money flows in. The townspeople buy new clothes and shoes, but they are increasingly uneasy about the price. Alfred Ill becomes paranoid, realizing the town is turning against him. He tries to flee but is stopped by the police, who claim he is needed for a legal matter. The teacher, who initially defended Ill, begins to waver. Claire's influence is felt everywhere, and the town's moral decay becomes apparent. Ill visits the priest, who offers no help, and the doctor, who tells him he is ill. The act ends with Ill's growing isolation and the town's collective decision to hold a vote on Claire's offer.

Act Three

The town holds a public vote, and the citizens unanimously decide to accept Claire's offer, justifying it as an act of justice. Alfred Ill, resigned to his fate, attends the vote and accepts his death. The townspeople, led by the mayor, kill Ill in a scene that is both brutal and ritualistic. Claire receives the body and pays the town. She leaves with Ill's corpse, saying she will take it to Capri. The town is now prosperous, but the moral cost is clear. The teacher, who had once defended Ill, is left with guilt, and the play ends with a sense of unease about the town's future.

Themes

- Moral corruption
- Wealth and power
- Justice vs. revenge

- Collective guilt
- Materialism

Notable Quotes

- "The world turned me into a whore. I will turn it into a brothel." — Claire Zachanassian says this to the townspeople, explaining her motivation for revenge.
- "I can buy justice. I can buy the world." — Claire declares her power to the town, emphasizing her wealth's ability to corrupt.
- "You will kill him. Not because of me, but because of your own greed." — Claire predicts the townspeople's moral failure, pointing to their self-interest.
- "I am going to die. But I am not afraid. I am only afraid for you." — Alfred III says this to the townspeople, showing his resignation and concern for their souls.
- "The world is a whorehouse. And I am the madam." — Claire's cynical view of the world, reflecting her belief that everything can be bought.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is The Visit about?

The Visit is a tragicomedy about a billionaire woman, Claire Zachanassian, who returns to her impoverished hometown and offers a fortune in exchange for the murder of the man who jilted her. The play explores how the townspeople's greed leads them to compromise their morals and eventually commit the murder.

Is The Visit worth reading?

Yes, The Visit is a classic of 20th-century drama. Its themes of corruption, justice, and human weakness are timeless. Dürrenmatt's sharp dialogue and dark humor make it engaging, and its short length makes it accessible. It is often studied in literature and theater courses.

How does The Visit end?

Spoiler: The townspeople vote to accept Claire's offer and kill Alfred III. Claire takes his body and leaves, paying the town. The town becomes prosperous, but the moral decay is evident. The play ends with the teacher expressing guilt, suggesting the town's new wealth is tainted.

Who should read The Visit?

Readers interested in classic plays, moral dilemmas, and social critique will enjoy The Visit. It is also relevant for those studying post-war European literature or the effects of capitalism on society. Students and theater enthusiasts will find it a compelling and thought-provoking work.

How long does it take to read The Visit?

The Visit is a short play, typically around 100 pages. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it would take about 1.5 to 2 hours to read. However, the play's dense themes may encourage slower reading.