

# The Visit



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF FRIEDRICH DÜRRENMATT

Dürrenmatt was born in 1921 in Konolfingen, a small town just outside the Swiss capital of Bern. The son of a pastor and the grandson of a well-known satirist, he developed a keen interest in philosophy and a dark sense of humor. Both qualities are manifest in his writings. Dürrenmatt began his career as a playwright in the mid-1940s, choosing to abandon his doctoral dissertation on the philosopher Kierkegaard in order to work on his first play. Later, when he received an honorary doctorate from the University of Pennsylvania, Dürrenmatt explained that he abandoned his academic work when he “realized that it is not only possible to think with the philosophy, but also with the theater stage.” His first play, *It is Written*, was immediately controversial and led to fights breaking out in the audience. He had his first significant success with *Romulus the Great*, in 1950, and followed that with *The Visit* in 1956. All of his plays include a degree of absurdity and the grotesque, but in doing so lay bare the hypocrisy and greed that, Dürrenmatt believed, characterized political life in post-war Switzerland. Other plays from Dürrenmatt’s oeuvre, including *The Physicists* (1961) and *The Meteor* (1966), take a similar track. Following the failure of his play *Der Mitmacher* in 1970, Dürrenmatt stopped producing new dramatic works in favor of revising literature he had already written; he took the view that his plays could never be finished if they were to accurately reflect the ever-changing nature of life, as Dürrenmatt believed they should. He continued to revise his works until his death in 1990.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*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 surrounding it geographically. 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. 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, abandoned its moral convictions in the interest of material and political gain.

## RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many other theatrical works deal explicitly with government corruption, including Nikolai Gogol’s *The Government Inspector* (1836) and Carol Zuckmayer’s *The Captain of Köpenick* (1931). While *The Visit* takes on the serious subject of political corruption, the play is simultaneously funny and serious (Dürrenmatt called the work “tragicomic”). Other plays with this blend of humor and tragedy include Harold Pinter’s [The Birthday Party](#), Samuel Beckett’s [Waiting for Godot](#), or Tom Stoppard’s [Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead](#). Many tragicomedies also overlap with Theatre of the Absurd, which is a style of play concerned with the meaninglessness of human existence. Other major examples of Theatre of the Absurd include Edward Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Jean Genet’s *The Maids*, and Eugene Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano*.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Visit* (German: *Der Besuch der alten Dame*)
- **When Written:** 1956
- **Where Written:** Switzerland
- **When Published:** The play was written and produced in 1956.
- **Genre:** Dürrenmatt describes the play as a “tragicomedy,” a comic response to the tragic nature of life in the wake of WWII. The play can also be considered a contribution to the theater of the absurd, which portrays the hopelessness of human struggle in a meaningless world.
- **Setting:** The fictional small Swiss town of Gullen in 1956
- **Climax:** The climax of *The Visit* comes near the end of its third act when the townspeople of Gullen finally execute Ill, thereby wrecking any hope that Ill might be saved or that humanism might prevail over greed.

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Movie love:** The German actress and documentarian Charlotte Ker approached Dürrenmatt in the early 1980s with the hope of producing a documentary about his life. The result of their collaboration was not only the film (entitled *Portrait of a Planet*), but also their marriage in 1984!

**Politically active:** Dürrenmatt was involved in global politics throughout his life and he wrote a number of articles supporting Israel during and following its six-day war with Egypt in 1967.



## PLOT SUMMARY

*The Visit* tells the story of a woman returning to her hometown after forty-five years to exact revenge on the man that betrayed her—or, as she puts it, to “buy justice.”

The play opens on a gaggle of unemployed townsmen who sit at a railway station in the fictional Swiss town of Gullen, awaiting the arrival of the famed billionaire Claire Zachanassian. They bemoan the deterioration of their home; Gullen was once a renowned cultural capital but has since fallen into a deep and devastating economic depression. Its impoverished citizens nevertheless hold out hope for their township—hope that Ms. Zachanassian, who was born and raised in Gullen, might endow the town’s restoration. Alfred III, Gullen’s “most popular man” and mayor-to-be, is leading a campaign to secure Claire’s donation; he was once her lover, and he expects that he should be able to leverage his relationship to her to get to her millions.

Claire arrives in Gullen several hours earlier than expected, throwing the townspeople into nervous disarray. While she and her entourage get off of the train, the Gulleners scramble to pull together the formal welcome they planned for her, frantically convening the choir and changing into their frock coats and top hats. III is the first to welcome the billionaire, bringing the two face-to-face for the first time in forty-five years. III showers Claire with compliments, hoping to loosen her purse strings with appeals to her vanity, but this fails. Claire bluntly states that she and III are old and fat now, and she proceeds to show him her many prosthetic limbs. She also takes a moment to introduce her Butler, Bobby; her henchmen, Roby and Toby; her seventh husband, Moby; and the blind eunuchs Koby and Loby. She explains that she gave her attendants rhyming names to suit her own preferences. Claire’s strange retinue, her disarming directness, and her outlandish luggage—which includes a caged panther and a coffin, among other things—unnerves some Gulleners, particularly the Teacher. Nevertheless, all are hopeful about her visit.

While her luggage is moved to her accommodations at the Golden Apostle Inn, Claire revisits her old trysting haunts with III. The two reminisce about their young love affair, which ended when III left Claire for the then-wealthier Matilda Blumhard, owner of Gullen’s general store. Claire fell into prostitution after III abandoned her, and thus met the wealthy John that became her first husband (the oil magnate Zachanassian).

Following their walk in the woods, Claire and III return to the Golden Apostle, where a banquet is being held in Claire’s honor. The Mayor makes a speech lionizing the billionaire in an obvious grab for money. Claire is unmoved by the insincere speech, but she nevertheless pledges one billion dollars to the town. She has only one condition: that someone kill Alfred III. This, of course, catches III off guard—until this point, he thought

that he had the billionaire eating out the palm of his hand. Furious, he dismisses Claire, but her Butler steps forward to explain. Forty-five years ago, before he was in Claire’s service, the Butler was Gullen’s Chief Justice and he heard a paternity case that a young Claire had brought against III. III falsely denied that he was the father of Claire’s child, and he bribed two witnesses to corroborate his claim, thus losing Claire the trial and causing her exile from Gullen and her lapse into prostitution. The perjuring witnesses were none other than Koby and Loby, whom Claire tracked down years later and had blinded and castrated. Her campaign of revenge continues now in Gullen with III as her target: she only wants “justice,” she says, and now she can afford it. Claire’s murderous proposal takes the Gulleners aback. Citing the town’s commitment to a rich humanistic tradition that values human life over capital, the Mayor emphatically rejects Claire’s offer on behalf of his constituents. Claire simply replies that she will wait for them to change their minds.

In the days following the dramatic banquet, III sees Claire’s henchmen regularly changing the wreaths on the empty coffin Claire brought with her to Gullen, presumably for III. He also sees an increase in business at the general store he manages; his customers have started buying previously unattainable luxury items on credit. When III notices his customers all wearing the same new and expensive **yellow shoes**, he begins to suspect his neighbors of considering Claire’s proposal—of buying goods in advance of her billion dollar donation (a prerequisite for which is III’s death).

A paranoid III visits Gullen’s authorities one by one—the Policeman, the Mayor, the Priest—seeking protection, but he finds that they too have begun to live above their means. Though the Gulleners insist that they will not consider Claire’s offer, their increase in spending indicates that they do anticipate Claire’s donation (and, by extension, III’s death). Understanding this, III attempts to flee town on the train, but he is intimidated into staying by the mob of townspeople that crowd around him at the station. Meanwhile, Claire observes the town from her balcony at the Golden Apostle as a mob of Gulleners hunt down her escaped **black panther**.

At the start of the play’s final act, Claire has just married her eighth husband, but is already preparing for divorce. In the midst of managing her marital business, she is visited by the Doctor and Teacher. They inform her that the townspeople have drawn up exorbitant debts, and that the town needs her help more than ever, but that no one is willing to kill III. They propose an alternative to Claire’s offer, suggesting that Claire invest in Gullen’s industry, which would not only reintroduce paying jobs in town, but would also produce returns for Claire. Much to their consternation, Claire reveals that she already owns the town’s industry. She intentionally ran it into the ground to cause Gullen’s financial collapse and lay the groundwork for her revenge on III.

Meanwhile at the general store, Ill's wife's customers have taken to openly denigrating Ill and sympathizing with Claire, marking a major shift in public opinion since the Gülleners defended Ill and rejected the billionaire's offer. When journalists enter the shop asking questions about Claire and Ill's relationship, the townspeople offer platitudes about young love and nostalgia, but keep mum on the issue of Claire's ultimatum. The Teacher, drunk and full of guilt, almost breaks the silence, but is kept in check by his fellow citizens until the journalists leave.

After days of keeping to himself above his shop, Ill suddenly reappears. He seeks out the Teacher who, still drunk, admits that the town cannot resist the temptation of Claire's money. When the Mayor stops by the shop to advertise a public meeting about Claire's offer, Ill promises to defer to the town's verdict. The Mayor indirectly advises Ill to kill himself (and save someone else the trouble), but Ill refuses, demanding that the people of Güllen take responsibility for their choices and kill him themselves.

Faced with what seems to be an inevitable early death, Ill spends his last few hours driving with his family and reconciling with Claire in the woods. Claire admits that she never stopped loving Ill, but that years of bitter resentment turned her love into something evil. When Ill is dead, Claire says, she will finally possess him as she'd always wanted to. The couple parts, and Ill heads to his "trial." The public meeting is well attended by the townspeople and by journalists reporting on Claire's visit. The Mayor, who moderates the meeting, takes pains not to alert the press to Claire's deadly ultimatum; he leads Güllen in a vote "to make justice a reality." The townspeople unanimously vote to accept Claire's money, and thus sentence Ill to death without saying so. They murder Ill while the journalists are at dinner and inform the press that Ill died from joy when Claire's endowment was accepted. Later, Claire collects the body and delivers a check to the Mayor. As she leaves Güllen with her former lover's body, the citizens of Güllen revel in their newfound prosperity.

exchange for Ill's execution. Claire is a formidable presence, disarming people with her brutal honesty and her low regard for the lives or feelings of others. She treats her husbands poorly, casually divorcing and marrying them to satisfy her own whims. Worse, she had Koby and Loby castrated, blinded, and shipped around the world like chattel. Perhaps her disregard for human life stems in part from her own apparent inhumanness—she is not a mere woman, but something "indestructible," "an avenging goddess," an assemblage of prostheses seemingly held together by hate. But as terrible as she is, Claire is also sympathetic—a woman scorned, who never stopped loving the man who wronged her.

**Alfred Ill** – Ill begins the play as Güllen's most popular citizen and its mayor-to-be, but he ultimately becomes the object of the town's derision—an obstacle to the billion dollar endowment promised to them by Claire on the condition that Ill be killed. As a young man, Ill romanced Claire, only to abandon her when she became pregnant. He falsely denied having fathered her love child, and bribed Koby and Loby (then known as Jakob Duckling and Walter Perch) to incriminate her. He went on to marry Matilda Blumhard for her money. When Claire returns to Güllen decades later and puts a price on his head, the popular Ill trusts that the town will support him. But after seeing his fellow Gülleners buying things they don't need with money they don't have, he begins to worry for his life, knowing that the greater the townspeople's debt, the greater their need to kill him and claim Claire's billion. Betrayed by his neighbors, defamed by authorities, and unable to successfully escape Güllen, Ill bravely accepts the consequences for his mistreatment of Claire, and he approaches his inevitable death with dignity.

**Husbands VII-IX** – Claire cycles through three husbands over the course of the play. She arrives to Güllen with her seventh husband in tow, but promptly abandons him to marry a German film star in Güllen's cathedral, as per her childhood wish. Not a day later, she divorces the star and prepares to marry a Nobel Prize recipient. Like everyone else in Claire's entourage, the trio receive rhyming names; they are Moby, Hoby, and Zoby, respectively. Stage directions for the play indicate that the same actor can play the three roles, which only underscores Claire's view of her husbands as interchangeable and indistinct.

**Butler** – Also known as Bobby (a nickname given by Claire), he was the former Chief Justice of Güllen, who presided over Claire's paternity trial before taking a job at the Kaffigen Court of Appeals. For the past twenty-five years, he has been in Claire's service, having been lured away from his prominent post at Kaffigen into becoming a butler by the exorbitant salary she offered him.

**Koby and Loby** – Formerly Jakob Duckling and Walter Perch, these are the men whom Ill bribed to defame Claire at her paternity trial by falsely claiming that they had slept with her. Years later, a wealthy Claire hunted the men down (Mr.



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Claire Zachanassian** – Claire is a fateful figure, having returned to Güllen after forty-five years to seek revenge upon Alfred Ill, a man who betrayed her in her youth. She was driven from town at seventeen after Ill falsely denied fathering her child and bribed two men to corroborate his claims. Exiled and without resources, Claire turned to prostitution, through which she met her first husband, the incredibly wealthy oil tycoon Zachanassian. Now the wealthiest woman in the world, Claire intends to buy herself justice, offering the townspeople of Güllen one billion dollars to improve their failing town in

Duckling in Canada and Mr. Perch in Australia), and bid Roby and Toby to castrate and blind them. The pair travels with Claire's entourage throughout the play, until Claire tires of them in Act III and sends them away to Hong Kong.

**Teacher** – The teacher is the only man in Gullen (besides Ill) to acknowledge the insidiousness of the Gulleners new spending habits after Claire's promise of a billion dollars in exchange for Ill's death. He struggles to balance his devotion to humanist philosophy with his desire for material gain. He and the Doctor visit Claire at the beginning of Act III, hoping to dissuade her from killing Ill. When that doesn't work, he nearly reveals Claire's plot to the journalists visiting Gullen, but ultimately finds himself unable to resist her promise of money.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Roby and Toby** – Former New York gangsters whom Claire saved from the electric chair for one million dollars each and now employs as sedan-chair bearers and on-call guitarists. The men are brutish and are almost always chewing gum.

**Mrs. Ill** – Ill's wife and the original owner of the general store that Ill now manages. Ill maligns their marriage after Claire bitterly accuses him of having married his wife for her assets, rather than love.

**Son** – Ill's son (whose real name is Karl). He eventually discontinues his daily visits to the railway station in search of work in favor of driving his new car around the countryside.

**Daughter** – Ill's daughter (whose real name is Ottilie). Her daily visits to the Employment Office in search of work eventually become daily trips to the tennis court in search of recreational leisure.

**Mayor** – The staid, rambling, and insincere Mayor of Gullen. He initially rejects Claire's proposal, but he is later seduced by the prospect of material gain. In the end, he incites the crowd at Ill's "trial" to vote to kill Ill.

**Policeman** – A Gullener, and the representative of law enforcement of the town within the play, who is eventually seduced by Claire's money.

**Pastor** – A Gullener, and the representative of religion in the town, who is eventually seduced by Claire's money.

**Doctor** – Gullen's doctor. He and the Teacher visit Claire at the beginning of Act III, hoping to dissuade her from killing Ill.

**First-Fourth Men** – Townspeople of Gullen. They also play the trees in the woods of Konradswil.

**Bailiff** – A man sent to place a lien on Gullen (i.e. to hold property in Gullen as collateral until the town has paid off its debts).

**Painter** – Gullen's sign painter.

**Miss Louise** – A citizen of Gullen and object of derision for the First and Second Women, who consider her tasteless.

**First and Second Women** – Two gossipy citizens of Gullen and patrons of Ill's general store.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### JUSTICE, MORALITY, AND MONEY

Claire's quest to win justice for Ill's betrayal propels the plot of *The Visit*, and she ultimately succeeds in taking Ill's life and reputation as punishment for his wrongs. In many stories that depict a person avenging past wrongs, the ultimate verdict is seen to vindicate justice, truth, and morality. *The Visit*, however, uses Claire's quest for justice—and the vapid and shifting definitions of justice to which the townspeople subscribe—to call into question whether "justice" is a concept with any meaning at all.

From the very beginning, justice means something different to each of the central characters in the play. To Claire, justice is the same as vengeance—it is her desire for disproportionate retribution against someone who wronged her forty-five years ago. This "justice" is not rooted in any external set of rules or guidelines, like religion or the law—rather, it is something to which Claire, who is driven by self-interest, feels personally entitled. Furthermore, Claire treats justice as a commodity to be bought or sold. When she offers the town a billion dollars in exchange for Ill's death, the Mayor protests that "justice can't be bought," but Claire responds that "Everything can be bought." Thus, as Claire herself admits, it's wealth that allows her to seek the precise "justice" she desires by essentially bribing the entire town to provide it.

For Ill, however, justice requires accountability to one's own actions. 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 grimy, petty shopkeeper." With no recourse (since all of Gullen's institutions have decided to kill him), Ill stops trying to justify his actions, and he simply acknowledges the pain he caused years ago. In the end, this sets him apart from his fellow Gulleners, who refuse to ever acknowledge their own moral failings. It also sets him apart from Claire, whose development as a character is static and stunted; she remains vengeful from beginning to end. Ill, meanwhile, undergoes a transformation from "a grimy, petty shopkeeper" into someone willing to hold himself and others to abstract ideals; 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 accepting Claire's dubious bargain.

For the townspeople, "justice" is an empty word—one that carries connotations of "doing the right thing," but is actually unconnected to any real principles and is therefore easily twisted to accommodate greed and self-interest. Upon hearing Claire's offer, the people of Gullen proudly and defiantly refuse. "[W]e are still in Europe," the Mayor reminds Claire. "We're not savages yet. In the name of the town of Gullen, I reject your offer. In the name of humanity. We would rather be poor than have blood on our hands." Despite the mayor's stated commitment to principle, this speech is quickly revealed to be empty: it is not long before the people of Gullen begin living above their means, implicitly acknowledging their intent to comply with Claire's bargain. At first, even with their most flagrant extravagances on full view, the townsfolk deny that their values have changed or that they intend to satisfy Claire's demands. However, once they can no longer deny their intentions, they change their concept of justice in order to fit their actions, rather than holding their actions accountable to their concept of justice.

This is clearest in the contrast between the Mayor's first speech refusing Claire's offer and the Teacher's speech at the trial in the third act. The Teacher's speech mirrors the Mayor's in its emphasis of principles ("The issue here is not money. [...] It is not prosperity, a comfortable way of life, luxury; the issue is whether we want to make justice a reality, and not only justice but all the ideals...that constitute the true value of our Western world."). However, while the Mayor had invoked these same principles to refuse Claire's offer, the Teacher is invoking them to justify accepting it. In this context, "justice" becomes essentially meaningless—an empty commodity disguised as morality. Justice, Dürrenmatt suggests, *can* be bought and principles and ideals are only relevant insofar as they are convenient.



### IRONY AND ARTIFICE

In the town of Gullen, nothing is as it seems: characters' motivations are not what they claim, false appearances disguise reality, and even the

town's economic downturn is revealed not to have happened as the townspeople believed. All of this creates an atmosphere of distrust and manipulation in which everyone is acting in their own best interest, no matter how sincere or compassionate they seem.

When the play opens, the townspeople of Gullen are furiously preparing for Claire's visit, attempting to dress up their poverty and impress the billionaire in the hopes that she might endow them with a large donation. Perhaps the most absurd of these displays—which include welcome signs and a choir performance—is the Mayor's blatant distortion of Claire's past (her bad school grades, skirmishes with the police, and petty

theft) into a fond speech honoring her for her intelligence, justice, and charity. This sleazy and misleading display is calculated to flatter Claire into giving money. Though the mayor exhorts the townsfolk to "be natural [and] be sincere," he also warns them not "to slip up on the timing." In short, Gullen tries to appear to genuinely admire Claire in order to mask their desperate need for her money.

Claire's early arrival, however, calls attention to this separation between appearance and reality, as the town's preparations are not done: the sign remains unfinished, the choir and band have not yet assembled, and the Gulleners remain in their shabby common clothes. Moreover, Claire is the only character willing to always call a situation as she sees it. Claire is quick to point out the untruths in the mayor's concocted speech, and bluntly deflects Ill's compliments of her appearance: "I've gotten old [...] and fat," she says. "And my left leg is gone. But the artificial one is quite something, don't you think?" Claire's arrival and brusque manner expose Gullen for what it is in more profound ways, as well. Though the townspeople initially refuse Claire's bargain of Ill's death for a billion dollars, her manipulation of them reveals their true values. Just as their feigned sincerity was meant to disguise their desperation, their vows not to kill Ill turn out to be disguises for their greed.

The difference between appearance and reality in *The Visit* is the source of both the play's humor and its tragedy. Throughout the play, the characters often say the opposite of what they mean—in other words, they speak ironically. This incongruity subverts the audience's expectations, and often compels readers and viewers to respond with laughter. For example, Ill tells Claire that she looks the same as she did when they were young, but in fact, many of her limbs have been replaced with prostheses. Claire's ravaged body records another humorous irony. Superficially, it is all artifice—an assemblage of prostheses apparently held together by a vengeful fury. Her leg looks like a leg, but is wood. Her hand feels like a hand, but is ivory. Her white wedding dress signals innocence and virginity, but is worn by a former prostitute and deeply vengeful woman. Nevertheless, Claire is the only character in the play that never deceives anyone. She is honest about her appearance and about her desire to see Ill killed. Like other characters in the play, then, Claire embodies a disconnect between appearance and reality—though her appearance is artificial, her words are always true.

By the end of the play, however, this humorous dissonance between truth and appearance becomes a source of tragic, dramatic irony. At the end of the play, the journalists leave Gullen believing that Ill died of joy, when, in reality, he was murdered in cold blood for money. The ultimate irony of the play, of course, is that the original petty reason for Ill's desertion of Claire—his decision to marry the shopkeeper's daughter for her money—is now mirrored in the unanimous rejection of Ill by the whole population of the town.



## LOVE AND PROSTITUTION

At the heart of *The Visit* is the complex relationship between Claire and Ill, whose deep adolescent love was broken by Ill's betrayal of her. This youthful love is the play's only example of real love: after their relationship ended, Ill married for money, and Claire became a prostitute before flippantly marrying a series of men that she clearly neither loves nor respects. While the love between Ill and Claire is shown to have been genuine, the end of their relationship—which, for both of them, irrevocably tangled the notion of love with the quest for money—has warped and embittered them both.

Like almost everything else in the world of *The Visit*, romantic love is no match for money; it is but another ideal easily perverted by greed. In fact, the foundational event of the play—the motivation for Claire's desire for revenge, and the reason that Ill and Claire live the lives they do—is Ill's decision, forty five years before the start of the play, to leave the pregnant Claire (whom he truly loved) to marry Matilda for her money. Ill's choice to marry for money forced Claire into prostitution to support herself, which made her think of sex ("the act of love") as something done for profit. It's no surprise, then, that Claire's love was "bought" by her first husband, the oil tycoon Zachanassian, and that Claire subsequently bought her marriages to husbands two through eight, whom she considered to be disposable ("Husbands are objects for display," she says).

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 and control his dead body. She says that she wants "to rebuild [their love] with my billions, I will change the past, by destroying you." Ill will, in a sense, become Claire's husband in death: Claire will place his corpse in a mausoleum on her estate, where he will remain eternally close to her. This proximity holds for Claire the potential to undo time and allow her to finally control the terms of their relationship.

In order to achieve her twisted dream of eternal love, though, Claire believes that she must buy it. This is directly informed by her experience of Ill buying justice (bribing false witnesses to condemn her), and her subsequent prostitution. "The world made a whore of me, now I'll make a whorehouse of the world," Claire says of her attempt to bribe the town into killing Ill. Thus, by buying Ill's death (and thereby his submission to her will), Claire is buying love (which is the only way she knows how to get it), and she is also deliberately degrading the town that degraded her. By sacrificing their ideals for money, then, the townspeople become prostitutes, or people for whom love has

been corrupted by money.



## HUMANISM AND DEHUMANIZATION

Güllen sees itself as a humanist town—a place with a value system that rejects selfishness and emphasizes the human capacity for compassion, mutual understanding, and respect. Claire's attempt to bribe the town into killing its most popular citizen for revenge, however, is anti-humanist: it is selfish, cruel, and it disregards the moral and legal imperatives that the town claims to value. As the townspeople struggle to balance greed with idealism and personal profit with their compassion for Ill, their humanist values are shown to be empty ideals that are easily discarded in favor of money and selfishness, even at the cost of murdering someone they love.

Dürrenmatt often uses references to humanist disciplines, such as music and literature, to invoke Güllen's humanist ideals. For example, townspeople comment several times on the fact that the writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and the composer Johannes Brahms have visited Güllen. Dürrenmatt also explicitly aligns Güllen's values with those of Europe and humanism, as the Mayor offers the following retort to Claire's ultimatum: "We are still in Europe. 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." These emphatic statements of the town's humanist values, however, are quickly shown to be hollow as the townspeople fall under the influence of Claire.

Claire is the play's embodiment of anti-humanism, since she easily disregards the integrity and personhood of others and believes that money, rather than humanist ideals, is most important. This is clear in her willingness to put a price on Ill's head, and in the dehumanizing way that she treats her husbands and the members of her entourage. Claire's primary source of power is financial; she buys her associates out of both legal trouble and respectable careers, for example, and then pays them handsomely enough to allow her to change their names to ridiculous rhyming nicknames. This emphasizes her disregard for their individuality, and also her ability to commodify people with ease. Claire turns Ill into a commodity by putting a price on his head, and the other characters turn themselves into commodities by putting prices on themselves. This is a direct subversion of humanist ideals, as Claire openly admits when she says, "Human kindness, gentlemen, is made for the purses of millionaires."

The ease with which the humanist Gülleners fall into Claire's anti-humanist influence is a commentary on the Second World War, which ended about a decade before *The Visit* was written. WWII was seen by many as the utter collapse of European humanism, as stable democracies fell to fascism and ideals of equality, tolerance, and justice failed to stop millions of Jewish citizens from being harassed, incarcerated, tortured, and

murdered. Furthermore, *The Visit* was written (and presumably takes place) in Switzerland, which remained neutral in WWII, refusing to align itself with either the Axis or the Allies. While Switzerland tried to frame this as a humanist decision, Dürrenmatt was enraged by what he saw as Swiss cowardice and hypocrisy in the face of evil. Rather than standing up to the Nazis, Dürrenmatt believed that the Swiss used their neutrality as a veil for their subtle collaboration with the Nazis: the Swiss sold arms to Germany, refused Jewish refugees, and allowed Germans to store stolen wealth in their banks. In this context, the Mayor's statement that the town would refuse Claire's offer because "We are still in Europe. We're not savages yet" is clearly ironic—for Dürrenmatt, European values were, at best, on shaky ground.

While the beginning of the play is littered with inspiring references to Goethe and Brahms, Dürrenmatt's references at the end of the play—once Ill has accepted that the town will kill him—are notably darker. On a final car ride with his family, Ill and his family point out local landmarks: the "Bockmann chimneys" evoke the smokestacks of the concentration camps, and Ill's son's comment that everyone has a Messerschmidt car references a company that turned to automobiles after having manufactured Nazi airplanes. Most significantly, Ill points out the "cranes of the Wagner Works," a reference to Richard Wagner, the German composer whose music Hitler held up as proof of German superiority. This reference complicates the notion that humanism is moral and uncorrupt: just as Hitler used Wagner to justify genocide, the town turns their ideal of "justice" into a rationale for murdering Ill. For Dürrenmatt, then, humanism is a set of empty values that fail to stand against evil, since they can so easily be twisted to justify heinous acts.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE BLACK PANTHER

Claire brings a large and strange collection of things with her to Gullen, and among them is her caged pet panther. The animal's presence invokes Claire's old nickname for Ill—she used to call him her "black panther." But Ill and the cat share more than just a name—both are imprisoned by the same mistress (one in a cage, the other on the losing side of a hellish ultimatum) and they meet the same tragic end at the hands of the townspeople. Such similarities, of course, invite us to see Ill and the panther as kindred subjects, companions in suffering condemned to die at the hands of those who fear them. The panther is Ill's animal complement—a symbol of what he ultimately becomes in the eyes of his killers, which is

something less-than-human and, therefore, conscionably killable. The parallel between Ill and the panther also underscores Claire's treatment of the people of the world as pets whom she can rename, belittle, exile, or even kill at her whim. This is behavior that, of course, the townspeople ultimately accept, despite that it dehumanizes them, too. So the panther evokes the loss of humanity among the townspeople who abandon their principles and allow themselves to be made into tools to be manipulated by Claire.



## THE EMPTY COFFIN

The empty coffin is also among the possessions Claire brings with her to Gullen. Its presence is foreboding from the moment it appears: when the Teacher first sees it, he senses that Claire is the type to toy with life and death like a Fate from Greek myth. After it is revealed that the coffin is intended for Ill, it becomes a symbol for the grim fate that awaits him. Act II opens with Roby and Toby adorning the casket with wreaths, just as they might at Ill's funeral. The repetition of this ritual—and the reiteration of implied threats in general—are so relentless and demoralizing that they crush the Gulleners' hope of resisting Claire's offer and Ill's hope of surviving. The coffin, in other words, becomes a symbol of the inevitable, of the fate into which Ill is literally boxed.



## YELLOW SHOES

The greater the Gulleners' debts, the greater their incentive to accept Claire's offer and kill Ill for money. With every new purchase, then, the townspeople further commodify Ill, raising the price on his head. The yellow shoes are among the many purchases the townspeople make on credit; some Gulleners opt for expensive chocolate or Schnapps, others for gold teeth and expensive clothing, but all of them sport these yellow clogs. The shoes—bright and ubiquitous—visibly represent Gullen's decline into frantic, amoral consumerism at the expense of Ill's life and human dignity.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Grove Press edition of *The Visit* published in 2010.

## Act 1 Quotes

☛☛ Two gangsters from Manhattan, sentenced to die in the electric chair at Sing Sing. Released at my request to carry my sedan chair. One million dollars per petition is what it cost me. The sedan chair comes from the Louvre, a gift from the French president. A nice gentleman. Looks just like he does in the papers. Carry me into town, Roby and Toby.

**Related Characters:** Claire Zachanassian (speaker), Roby and Toby

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 17-18

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage, from the beginning of the play, explains the origin of two of Claire's servants, Roby and Toby, who were convicted criminals before Claire bought their way out of a death sentence. This is the first inkling in *The Visit* of Claire's penchant for buying justice. To most people, a justice system with any integrity would not allow a billionaire to buy two convicts out of serving their sentence, but here Claire flippantly states that she has done just that. This not only foreshadows her buying "justice" in Güllen by paying for the murder of Alfred Ill, but it also more fundamentally casts doubt on the notion of justice overall by showing that Claire's money alone gives her extraordinary power over the American judicial system (as well as access to the French president). This passage also begins to suggest the way that Claire dehumanizes those around her. Roby and Toby are not her servants' real names—she has renamed them to amuse herself, and their role is to carry around her sedan chair as though she were a queen.

☛☛ ILL: I wish time were suspended, my little sorceress. If only life hadn't torn us apart.

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: You wish that?

ILL: Just that, nothing else. You know I love you! (*He kisses her right hand.*) The same cool white hand.

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: You're wrong. Another prosthesis. Ivory.

ILL: (*Dropping her hand, horrified*) Clara, is everything about you artificial?!

**Related Characters:** Claire Zachanassian (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 26

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Claire and Ill have met in the woods to speak privately. Ill is continuing to flatter Claire in order to try to convince her to donate money to the town, while Claire seems more interested in talking about the specifics of their past. Ill was the one who chose to abandon Claire, so it's an odd—and perhaps disingenuous—statement that he wishes they could suspend the time of their youth. This turns into an irony after their misunderstanding about Claire's prosthetic hand. Ill is horrified that the hand that seemed real is actually artificial and he wonders if everything about Claire is artificial—however, Ill is the one who has not been honest. Though Claire's body is made of many artificial parts, she is the only character in the play who always speaks truth. Ill, meanwhile, has the appearance of being real (all his body parts are natural), though he often lies. This passage, then, is a concrete example of the play's theme of the disconnect between appearance and reality. It's also a foreshadowing of Ill's ultimate fate, in which he will, in a sense, be suspended in the time of his and Claire's love.

☛☛ You have remained unforgettable. Truly. Your academic achievements are still held up as an example by our educators, especially the interest you showed in the most important subject, botany and zoology, thus expressing your sympathy with every living being, indeed with all creatures in need of protection. Even then, your love of justice and your charitable nature were widely admired.

**Related Characters:** Mayor (speaker), Claire Zachanassian

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 29

**Explanation and Analysis**

This passage is part of the Mayor's speech to Claire and the townspeople upon Claire's arrival in Güllen. As the speech is meant to flatter Claire into giving money, the Mayor deliberately distorts the details of Claire's undistinguished youth in order to make her seem different than she was. This section of the speech has thematic resonance with many events to come. In *The Visit*, education and love of

learning are associated with humanism (which means valuing the human capacity for mutual understanding and selflessness), but the Mayor previously conceded that Claire was never a good student. Thus, the Mayor is painting Claire as a humanist, even though he knows she isn't one, which shows how the town's humanist principles can be easily distorted for personal gain and convenience. Furthermore, the Mayor's celebration of Claire's sense of justice and compassion for living creatures will soon be seen for the monstrous irony that it is, since Claire is actually on a quest to pervert justice and harm somebody she loved.

☞ CLAUDE ZACHANASSIAN: I will tell you the condition. I will give you a billion, and with that billion I will buy myself justice.

MAYOR: What exactly do you mean by that, Madam?

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: I mean what I said.

MAYOR: But justice can't be bought!

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: Everything can be bought.

**Related Characters:** Mayor, Claire Zachanassian (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 31

### Explanation and Analysis

This conversation comes after the dramatic moment in which Claire reveals that she will give a billion dollars to Güllen, but only on one condition. Though she has not yet revealed the condition, in this passage she clearly states her motivations for the bargain: she is buying justice. In humanist societies, justice is a sacred principle that ensures fairness and accountability. Justice is supposed to be disinterested—that is to say, it is supposed to treat everyone equally, regardless of their circumstances—and it is supposed to be separated from personal desires, biases, and wealth. For a democracy, justice is considered a foundational principle, and to openly claim to be buying justice is the political equivalent of blasphemy; Claire, here, is appearing to question the very order of society. The Mayor is as appalled by this as one might expect a good humanist to be, and Claire's cool confidence that she will prevail in defying a sacred principle of democracy is unnerving. For the remainder of the play, as the

townspeople slowly give in to Claire's demands, these words resonate more and more loudly. By the end, it's clear that Claire is right—everything can be bought, even a person's most deeply-held values.

☞ Correct. Chief Justice Hofer. Forty-five years ago I was Chief Justice of Güllen and then moved on to the Court of Appeal in Kaffigen, until twenty-five years ago Mrs. Zachanassian offered me the opportunity to enter her service as her butler. I accepted. A peculiar career for a man of learning, perhaps, but the salary was so fantastic—

**Related Characters:** Butler (speaker), Claire Zachanassian

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 31

### Explanation and Analysis

While Claire is explaining to the townspeople that her donation will come on one condition, she takes a detour to explain that she will be buying herself justice, and that justice—despite being a principle considered to be above money—can, in fact, be bought. Part of her proof is the story of her butler, who was once the Chief Justice of Güllen. Just as Claire bought Roby and Toby out of their death sentences in New York, Claire bought justice with her butler—she literally bought a respected judge out of the court system and into being a personal servant (a job considered much less prestigious) by paying him a large sum of money. This further shows Claire's ability to turn people into commodities by offering them an amount of money they cannot refuse, even if it compromises their integrity, values, or passions. Thus, this passage suggests that people's principles are more malleable than they might like to think, particularly when greed and personal interest are involved, and even when the person being tempted is a person who represents one of the highest institutions of humanist society, the court of law.

☞ BUTLER: What happened to you?

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: I became a prostitute.

BUTLER: Why?

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: The court's verdict turned me into one.

**Related Characters:** Claire Zachanassian, Butler (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 34

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Claire and her butler tell the story of how Alfred III betrayed Claire by bribing witnesses to falsely testify that III was not the father of her child. The courts ruled against Claire, and so she was forced to turn to prostitution to support herself—a miscarriage of justice, in other words, forced Claire to become a prostitute. This passage shows how corruption breeds more corruption. III's immoral and cynical manipulation of the courts forced Claire to make a living in a profession considered to be immoral. Thus "justice," to Claire, became an empty principle—one that could be wielded for personal gain. This experience of being betrayed by justice made Claire cynical, and for that reason she believes that buying revenge on III is equivalent to getting justice for the wrongs he committed against her.

☝ Life has gone on, but I have forgotten nothing, III. Neither the woods of Konradswiel nor Petersen's barn, neither Widow Boll's bedroom nor your treachery. Now we have grown old, the two of us, you down at the heels and me cut to pieces by surgeons' knives, and now I want us both to settle accounts: you chose your life and forced me into mine. You wanted time to be suspended, just a moment ago, in the woods of our youth, so full of impermanence. Now I have suspended it, and now I want justice, justice for a billion.

**Related Characters:** Claire Zachanassian (speaker), Alfred III

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 35

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Claire explains to the town that, in exchange for her donation, the townspeople must kill Alfred III. Here, she publicly addresses III himself, recalling the happiness and love of their youth and the betrayal that shattered their relationship. A noteworthy portion of this speech is Claire's statement that III chose his life, thereby forcing Claire into a life she hadn't wanted. Claire was vulnerable in the moment in which III betrayed her: she was pregnant, she had no

money, and she lacked professional and social options because she was a woman. III, though, had the option to marry someone wealthy to improve his own life, and he did that rather than taking responsibility for the woman he loved and the child he fathered. III, in other words, made a selfish choice, and Claire had to grapple with the tremendous fallout of that choice. Furthermore, III's manipulation of the justice system taught Claire that justice is a tool to be wielded for personal gain. As a result, Claire believes that getting justice for III's betrayal means subjecting III to the kind of situation she endured: one in which he has no power, and must accept her choice to ruin his life.

☝ Mrs. Zachanassian, we are still in Europe; we're not savages yet. In the name of the town of Gullen I reject your offer. In the name of humanity. We would rather be poor than have blood on our hands.

**Related Characters:** Mayor (speaker), Claire Zachanassian

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 35

### Explanation and Analysis

Once Claire has laid out the terms of her donation to the town, the Mayor reacts with outrage. Citing their values, he says that the town cannot kill Alfred III in order to obtain a much-needed financial contribution, and he seems offended that Claire would even suggest it. This, of course, turns out to be hollow idealism, as all the townspeople—including the Mayor—eventually betray their principles and give in to Claire's demands. In light of this reversal, this quote takes on a deep cynicism—even cherished principles, Dürrenmatt suggests, are up for negotiation, particularly when money is on the table. This quote takes on further significance in light of the historical context of the play. First staged in 1956, *The Visit* comes almost exactly a decade after Europe ripped itself apart in the Second World War. Thus, Dürrenmatt undoubtedly meant the Mayor's reference to Europeans not being "savages" and not wanting blood on their hands ironically. European principles, in light of recent history, would certainly not preclude the townspeople from killing one of their own for personal gain.

## Act 2 Quotes

☞☞ Zachanassian's favorite piece. He always wanted to hear it. Every morning. He had class, all right, that old tycoon with his tremendous fleet of oil tankers and his racing stables, and billions in the bank. A marriage like that was still worthwhile. A great teacher, a great dancer, a master of all sorts of devilry. I learned all his tricks.

**Related Characters:** Claire Zachanassian (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 39

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Claire is speaking of her first husband, the oil tycoon Zachanassian, who essentially bought her out of prostitution by marrying her and then left her his fortune when he died. Claire is referring at the beginning of the quote to an Armenian folk tune that Zachanassian loved, which associates Zachanassian with the humanist love of music and the arts (much like Güllen is associated with humanism through its connection to Brahms and Goethe). However, Claire's subsequent description of Zachanassian's "tricks" and "devilry" undercuts the possibility of equating humanist pastimes (such as music) with morality and principle.

In addition, it's noteworthy that Claire speaks of Zachanassian with more fondness than any of her other husbands, but, nonetheless, she does not seem to have loved him in the way that she once loved Ill. Here, Claire describes a marriage that was transactional. Instead of speaking of what she loved about him, she describes what he could give to her, which was not money alone: he taught her to use that money to manipulate. Claire's relationship to Ill was based on love (a humanist principle) but was then proved hollow, while her relationship to Zachanassian was based on money and it never betrayed her (on the contrary, the relationship only gave her power). This passage thus strongly suggests that humanism is a false ideal.

☞☞ ILL: You've got new shoes. New yellow shoes.

SECOND MAN: So?

ILL: You, too, Hofbauer. You, too, are wearing new shoes. (*He looks at the women, walks over to them slowly, horrified.*) You too. New yellow shoes. New yellow shoes.

**Related Characters:** Alfred III (speaker), First–Fourth Men

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 43

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Ill is slowly realizing that all of the Gülleners are living above their means, which is visually apparent in the expensive yellow shoes they are suddenly wearing. Claire has offered the town a billion dollars in exchange for Ill's life (and half of that will be divided among the individual townspeople), so Ill knows that the more debt the townspeople take on by buying luxuries, the more likely they will be to give in to Claire's offer in order to relieve themselves of their debt. Thus, the yellow shoes are a way for the audience (and for Ill) to visualize the shift in the public's intentions. At the beginning of the play, the townspeople wore drab clothes and insisted that they would never kill Ill for money, but as more and more people put on yellow shoes (and take on the debt those shoes imply), it becomes clear that the town's good intentions have changed.

☞☞ ILL: The customers I've had this morning. Usually there's no one for the longest time, and now, for the past few days, they're coming in droves.

FIRST MAN: It's because we stand by you. We stick by our Ill. Firm as a rock.

**Related Characters:** First–Fourth Men, Alfred III (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 41

**Explanation and Analysis**

In this passage, Ill is uneasily remarking that business is booming in his store. Since Güllen is in a prolonged economic depression that has not yet lifted, the townspeople's new spending habits are alarming to Ill—the more debt they take on, the more likely they will be to accept Claire's offer to kill him for money. Here, Ill obliquely raises this concern with a customer who is spending more money than normal, but this customer claims to still have the same humanist principles of loyalty and compassion as

always. Despite the fact that this customer's extra spending is directly connected to his imminent betrayal of Ill, the customer frames his immoral activity in humanist terms. He tells Ill that he's not spending more money because he is prioritizing his self interest and greed over protecting a beloved community member, but rather that he is doing so because he is so loyal to that community member. This is another example of how humanist principles are empty and can be contorted to support immoral activity.

☞ MAYOR: You forget that you're in Gullen. A town with a humanist tradition. Goethe slept here. Brahms composed a quartet. These values impose an obligation.

*A man enters, left, with a typewriter.*

MAN: The new typewriter, Your Honor. A Remington.

**Related Characters:** Mayor (speaker), Alfred Ill

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 52-53

### Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Ill has gone to the Mayor to express his concern that the town is going to betray him. As the Mayor is telling Ill that his concerns are misplaced and that Gulleners would never betray him because of their obligation to their humanist principles, a man brings the mayor a new, expensive typewriter. Since the townspeople taking on unpayable debts is the principal signal to Ill that they intend to betray him for money, this scene appears to catch the Mayor in a lie. City Hall is making extravagant purchases, despite the Mayor's insistence that everyone is still adhering to their principles. This scene comes in a sequence of public officials—such as the policeman, the Mayor, and the pastor—seeming dismissive but also evasive of Ill's concerns. Each of them uses humanism as an alibi for their true intentions, though not one of Gullen's civic leaders truly plans to refuse personal gain in order to stand up for Ill. This shows, once again, that humanist principles are not strong enough to resist greed and selfishness, not even among those people whose very social role is to enforce and uphold humanist values.

## Act 3 Quotes

☞ Human kindness, gentlemen, is made for the purses of millionaires. With financial power like mine, you can afford yourself a new world order. The world made a whore of me, now I'll make a whorehouse of the world. Pay up or get off the dance floor. You want to join the dance? Only paying customers merit respect. And believe me, I'll pay. Gullen for a murder, boom times for a corpse.

**Related Characters:** Claire Zachanassian (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 72

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Claire has just revealed to the townspeople that she owns all the industry in Gullen and she has caused the town's economic downturn in order to create the conditions under which the townspeople would murder Ill. The teacher has just urged Claire to be kind and abandon her desire for revenge, but Claire responds that kindness—a humanist value—is actually based on money and self interest. This is yet another example of Dürrenmatt sowing doubt about the value of humanism in the face of greed. In addition, Claire states in this passage a primary motivation for her bargain with Gullen: that she wants to corrupt the town just as she feels it corrupted her. In other words, Claire explicitly wants to reveal the hypocrisy at the center of the town's professed humanist values and force them to acknowledge that they live by self-interest.

☞ If he tries to expose Clara by claiming she put a price on his head or something like that, when actually it was just an expression of unspeakable suffering, we'll just have to take action.

**Related Characters:** First-Fourth Men (speaker), Claire Zachanassian

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 75

### Explanation and Analysis

With journalists sniffing around Gullen, the townspeople (who have now decided to kill Ill) are worried that the press will get wind of their cruel bargain. The language they use to try to keep everyone quiet in front of the press is revealing

of their values. Instead of owning up to the fact that they plan to kill a community member for money—something that they had previously found unthinkable immoral—they have now twisted their idea of justice to fit their new plan. Here, a townspeople rejects the idea that Claire has put a price on Ill's head (which she explicitly has), instead justifying her offer by framing it as a fair and understandable reaction to the suffering that Ill caused her. Thus, the humanist values of empathy and justice that once led the townspeople to reject Claire's offer are now being used to support killing Ill. It seems, then, that humanist values have allowed the townspeople to deceive themselves about their own morality. Unlike Claire, they do not own up to their selfishness—they prefer to think of themselves as upholding their principles, even as they indulge their worst impulses.

☛ The temptation is too great and our poverty is too wretched. But I know something else. I too will take part in it. I can feel myself slowly turning into a murderer. My faith in humanity is powerless. And because I know this, I have turned into a drunk. I am scared, Ill, just as you have been scared. I still know that some day an old lady will visit us too, and that then what is happening to you now will happen to us, but soon, maybe in a few hours, I will no longer know it.

**Related Characters:** Teacher (speaker), Claire Zachanassian, Alfred Ill

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 85

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the Teacher (who has been the play's most steadfast defender of sparing Ill's life and keeping to humanist values) has finally relented to the fact that he will participate in murdering Ill. This passage is chilling because the Teacher knows that what he's doing is wrong, but he also knows that he and the rest of the town cannot resist doing it. It shakes his faith in humanity, as he says, and terrifies him, because it shows him that his humanist worldview is wrong—the world is much more selfish and dark than he has ever admitted. This is the most powerful evidence so far that humanist values are empty and powerless.

Furthermore, the Teacher implies that accepting Claire's bargain will irrevocably corrupt the town. Just as Ill's manipulation of the justice system corrupted Claire and

precipitated the circumstances of the play, the Teacher says that one day "some old lady will visit us too," by which he means that the town will pay for its betrayal of Ill. However, by the time that happens the Teacher will have killed Ill and therefore become someone different—someone corrupted—who can no longer see the inevitability of retribution. This is one of the darkest passages in the play, because it suggests that violence, greed, and corruption are not only inevitable, but they also destroy whomever they touch. The implication, of course, is that all of humanity will inevitably become depraved.

☛ Your Honor! I've been through hell. I saw you all going into debt, and with every sign of prosperity I felt death creeping closer. If you had spared me that anguish, that horrible fear, it would have all been different, we could speak on different terms, I would take the rifle. For all of your sake. But then I shut myself in, conquered my fear. Alone. It was hard; now it's done. There is no turning back. Now you must be my judges. I will submit to your decision, whatever it turns out to be. For me it will be justice; I don't know what it will be for you. May God help you live with your judgment. You can kill me, I won't complain, I won't protest, I won't defend myself, but your action is yours, and I can't relieve you of it.

**Related Characters:** Alfred Ill (speaker), Mayor

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 90

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is Ill's speech in response to the Mayor's request that Ill kill himself so that the townspeople don't have to have Ill's murder on their conscience. As Ill subtly points out, the request is absurd—pressuring Ill to kill himself so that the townspeople can profit is not, at this point, morally different from killing him. Ill notes that if the townspeople hadn't already decided to kill him (and then lied to him about it while he was left alone to fear for his life), then he might be able to have an honest and compassionate conversation with the town about whether it would make moral sense for him to sacrifice himself for everyone's sake. However, Ill is now being given a false choice, since if he chooses not to kill himself, he will still be killed by the town. Ill has taken responsibility for his actions and he's ready to accept the consequences, but he insists that the town do the same—he won't allow the townspeople to rest easily believing that their selfishness is okay since it

was Ill himself who chose to die. This is a powerful moral stand from Ill. However, the Teacher's speech about how his own corruption is inevitable makes the audience wonder to what end Ill is standing up for principles, since those principles have proved, time and time again, to be empty.

●● ILL: The town's holding a meeting this evening. They'll sentence me to death and one of them will kill me. I don't know who he will be or where it will happen, I only know that I'm ending a meaningless life.

CLAIRE ZACHANASSIAN: I loved you. You betrayed me. But the dream of life, of love, of trust—this dream that was a reality once—I haven't forgotten that. I want to rebuild it with my billions, I will change the past, by destroying you.

**Related Characters:** Claire Zachanassian, Alfred Ill (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 98

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Claire and Ill have met in the forest for the last time. Ill has accepted his fate, and his statement that his life was meaningless seems to indicate his resignation to the fact that the higher principles for which he thought he had lived were false. The happiest time in Ill's life was when he was in love with Claire, but he himself destroyed that and he has, unknowingly, lived with the consequences. His selfishness has meant that the life he lived was empty of love and morally corrupt, and now its end seems to lack gravitas or completeness. Claire, however, believes that, despite everything that has happened, she can reclaim their past by getting vengeance. Claire's statement here implies that by buying justice and killing Ill she can reverse all of the corruption that has ruined their lives. This is equivalent to fighting fire with fire, but Ill doesn't protest. In a way, it gives his death some meaning to think it might bring about a return to a better time, even if that is unlikely.

●● MAYOR: The Claire Zachanassian Endowment has been accepted. Unanimously. Not for the sake of the money—

THE COMMUNITY: Not for the sake of the money—

MAYOR: But for the sake of justice—

THE COMMUNITY: But for the sake of justice—

MAYOR: And to allay our conscience.

THE COMMUNITY: And to allay our conscience.

MAYOR: For we cannot live if we sanction a crime in our midst—

THE COMMUNITY: For we cannot live if we sanction a crime in our midst—

**Related Characters:** Mayor (speaker), Alfred Ill, Claire Zachanassian

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 104-105

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage is the moment in which the town officially commits to killing Ill in exchange for Claire's donation. Significantly, the language with which they accept the deal is similar to the language they had once used to protest it: previously, they said they believed in justice over money and that they could not permit Ill to be killed because they did not want blood on their hands. Here, they have reversed themselves. Instead of believing it would be unjust to kill Ill, they seem now to have made themselves believe that it would be unjust *not* to kill him, since he deserves to be punished for his betrayal of Claire. Obviously, death is a disproportionate punishment for Ill's crime, and because of this, it's clear that the townspeople have simply used their humanist principles as a justification for their own selfishness and violence. The emptiness of these principles is underscored by the eerie repetition of the Mayor's words by the whole community. Nobody is shown to have personal integrity; everyone goes along with an unjust course of action, seeming to accept what the Mayor says without question. The particular irony here, of course, is that the opposite of what the Mayor and the town are saying is true: they have accepted Claire's offer for money alone (in defiance of justice) and their very acceptance of the offer is, implicitly, sanctioning a horrific crime in their midst.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## ACT 1

The play opens on the fictional Swiss cathedral town of Gllen, literally “liquid excrement” in Swiss German. The name fits: the town is dirty, dilapidated, and, as noted by a chorus of the local unemployed (the First Man, Second Man, Third Man, and Fourth Man), the town is in the midst of a deep and mysterious economic depression, its industry having suddenly failed. The unemployed men sit at Gllen’s railway station, watching the express trains that used to stop in their town pass it by. They anticipate the arrival of the billionaireess Claire Zachanassian (ne Wscher), from whom they and their fellow citizens hope to secure a donation with which to restore Gllen to its former glory.

The Schoolmaster, the Mayor, the Priest, and Alfred III, Gllen’s “most popular personality,” arrive at the railway station and review their preparations for Claire’s arrival. They hope to move the billionaireess to donate to their town with an elaborate welcome ceremony with performances by Gllen’s mixed choir, band, and gymnastics club, as well as an ingratiating speech from the Mayor.

As III helps the Mayor prepare for his speech, the two of them discuss Claire. She was born and raised in Gllen, and was III’s lover. III remembers her fondly, and laments how “life ... nothing but life” separated him from her. When the Mayor asks for more details about Claire to use in his speech, III recalls that she once threw rocks at police arresting a vagabond and, another time, stole potatoes to give to a widow. The Mayor favorably interprets these stories to reflect Claire’s “love of justice” and “charitable disposition.”

The Mayor recognizes that his speech alone will not secure an endowment from Claire; he calls on III to exploit his connection to the billionaireess—to appeal to her nostalgia for their young love. Further vesting his trust in III, The Mayor declares III to be his successor.

*Given the tensions between appearance and reality that undergird his play, it isn’t surprising that Drrenmatt’s stage directions are so specific about how Gllen should “look.” The shoddily tiled roof of the railway station, the ripped posters on its walls, the outlines of dilapidated buildings in the background—these details visually alert us to the town’s dire situation even before the unemployed men say anything. This opening image mirrors—and sharply contrasts with—the image of a prosperous Gllen with which the play ends.*



*This scene is supposed to seem a little sleazy, since their grand gestures obviously aren’t about a genuine love or respect that the town has for Claire—the whole celebration is a transparent attempt to flatter her into donating money.*



*The Mayor distorts III’s memories of Claire—of her bad school grades, skirmishes with the police, and potato pilfering—into a fond speech honoring her for her intelligence, justice, and charity. The compliments are obviously self-serving: the rhetorical manipulations are meant to appeal to Claire’s vanity and charity.*



*“Love” is neither pure nor idyllic in Drrenmatt’s play, but rather a commodity, a leveraging tool, or sometimes even a spur to violence. Here, III intends to exploit Claire’s affections for financial gain.*



Suddenly, an express train chartered for Stockholm makes an unscheduled stop in Gullen, throwing the townspeople into a frenzy; Claire Zachanassian has arrived, and two hours early at that. She is a sight to behold, caked with makeup and laden with ostentatious jewelry, grand for the same reasons that she is grotesque. She begins to detrain with her entourage, including her Butler and her Husband VII, but is stopped by an irate Train Supervisor demanding that she offer an explanation for pulling the train's emergency break. Claire nonchalantly offers him several thousand dollars instead. The stunned Supervisor soon realizes to whom he is talking, and mortified, softens his tone, obsequiously offering to stall the train while Claire tours Gullen and begging her not to report him to railway management.

Meanwhile, Claire's early arrival has thrown Gullen into total disarray. The performers aren't ready, the Mayor is without his frock coat and top hat, and the banner welcoming Claire is unfinished. The villagers frantically assemble while Claire talks to the Train Supervisor and they are shocked by her casual attitude toward money, murmuring when she pays off and dismisses the Supervisor.

As Claire takes her leave of the Supervisor, Ill steps forward to welcome her, bringing the two together for the first time in forty-five years. They recall the pet names they gave one another as young lovers, Ill calling Claire his "little wildcat" and "little sorceress" and Claire calling Ill her "**black panther**." Ill proceeds to shower his former lover with praise, confident that flattery will win her heart and loosen her purse strings. He is wrong; Claire bluntly rejects his appeals to her vanity, perhaps because she is no longer vain—she knows full well that she has grown old and fat, and doesn't hesitate to show Ill her prosthetic leg, which she had fitted after a devastating (and dismembering) car accident.

As Ill scrambles for the right words to respond to Claire's brutally honest comments, she introduces him to her seventh husband. His real name is Pedro, but she has effectively renamed him Moby to rhyme with Bobby, her Butler's name.

By this point, Gullen's villagers have congregated, the mixed choir and Youth Club have taken their places upstage, and all are ready to extend an enthusiastic formal welcome to Claire. The ceremony starts inauspiciously, however; the clattering of a passing express train drowns out the choir's song.

*Claire flexes her proverbial muscle in front of the Gulleners, first by completely disregarding the scheduling concerns of the train company and its passengers, then by casually tossing a large sum of money to the Train Supervisor. This action in particular reminds the impoverished Gulleners how desperately they rely on the exorbitantly wealthy Ms. Zachanassian.*



*Claire arrives just after the Mayor has warned his constituents not "to slip up on the timing" of their welcome. The irony is played for laughs. It also exposes the Gulleners—who haven't had the time to put on their literal and proverbial top hats—for what they really are: impoverished schemers desperate for help.*



*Claire is often the only character to speak the unadorned truth. She catches Ill off guard when she bluntly deflects his compliments: "I've gotten old [...] and fat," she says. "And my left leg is gone. But the artificial one is quite something, don't you think?" Her brutal straightforwardness exposes just how much Ill equivocates—he relies on lies to charm Claire.*



*Claire's assignment of rhyming nicknames to her attendants demonstrates her disregard for their individuality. It also recalls Adam's naming—and subordination—of the animals of Eden.*



*Circumstance compromises the Gulleners' attempts to get the welcome ceremony back on track. The event is a disaster, and betrays the undignified desperation the Gulleners feel (which they meant to conceal from Claire).*



Claire nevertheless commends the choir, making special mention of one of its bass singers. The singer introduces himself as Officer Hahnke, the Policeman. Claire proceeds to ask him if he'd be willing to simply ignore a crime in Gllen, then she laughs. She then suggests to the Pastor that the death penalty be reinstated in Switzerland, and to the Doctor that he attribute the next death in Gllen to a heart attack. Claire's cryptic comments catch each of the men off guard; they don't know what to make of them. Ill, however, finds them hilarious, chortling at what appears to him to be black humor.

At Claire's request, the welcome parade moves from the railway station to the town. Claire herself cannot move around easily with her artificial leg, so she is borne into town atop a sedan chair carried by her burly, gum-chewing attendants Roby and Toby. The pair are former New York gangsters, saved from the electric chair by Claire's money and now working as her servants.

Once in town, Claire sends Roby and Toby back for her luggage, which includes not only many suitcases, but also a **coffin** and a caged **black panther**. Claire has also brought along two small, blind eunuchs named Koby and Loby, who repeat everything they say at least twice. The Mayor dismisses the men, the cat, and the coffin as only the whims of a "world-famous [lady]," but the Teacher finds them unsettling. In fact, he finds everything about Claire unsettling, and compares her to "an avenging goddess...spinning the web of destiny."

While her things are delivered to her room at the "Golden Apostle" hotel, Claire expresses a desire to revisit the sites of her youth with her former lover and her entourage. The group heads first into the woods of Konradswel, represented onstage by the First Man, Second Man, Third Man, and Fourth Man, who hold twigs in outspread hands and proclaim themselves to be trees. Here, Claire and Ill encounter the tree that they once inscribed with their names; Claire comments that the names have faded and grown apart, and that the tree has grown fatter and uglier like them. She then dismisses her entourage, wishing to discuss things alone with Ill.

Noticing the boulder on which she and Ill once kissed and the trees and bushes under which they made love, Claire reminisces about their love affair. They cared deeply for one other, she recalls, but Ill nevertheless decided to marry the wealthier Matilda Blumhard. Now, Claire can't help but acknowledge the dramatic irony of the situation—she is now the richest woman in the world, while Ill is destitute and unhappily married.

*Claire's questions seem directed toward some malevolent end, but are too cryptic to make sense of at this point. Echoes of this scene resonate through the play's later acts, when the Policeman, Pastor, and other authorities are faced with moral challenges.*



*By "purchasing" Roby and Toby from prison, Claire proves that that "justice" can be bought; the penal code is no match for her wealth. Additionally, the fact that Claire's entourage includes freed murderers is ominous foreshadowing of Ill's fate.*



*The appearance of the black panther evokes Ill's nickname and, by metonymy, his whole self; the man and the animal share a common name and mistress. The image of the panther next to the coffin foreshadows something ominous (i.e. Ill's death). The Teacher picks up on this foreboding (even though he doesn't know Ill will die) and compares Claire to a Greek Goddess or Fate, engineering tragedy from on high (i.e. her sedan chair).*



*One of Drrenmatt's more interesting stage directions specifies that the four men from the train station should play the part of the woods of Konradswel. The effect is surreal—the audience clearly sees the artifice of the scene, but Claire and Ill don't, highlighting once more the disjuncture between appearance and reality in Drrenmatt's play. Moreover, the stage direction reiterates the facelessness of the play's supporting cast—for Claire they are nothing more than props to be manipulated.*



*Like anything else in the "The Visit," romantic love is no match for money. The promise of financial security with Matilda proved more important to Ill than the genuine affection he felt for Claire.*



Ill expresses regret about how things turned out, but newly pledges himself to Claire, eager to make things right (and, of course, secure a donation). His ploy appears to work; Claire implies that she will give millions to Gullen. An excited Ill eagerly kisses her hand—another prosthesis, he learns. Shocked, he asks if everything about her is artificial. She responds that she is “indestructible.”

A scene change relocates Ill, Claire, the entourage, and the tree-men (who are men once again) to the Golden Apostle, where the town band and the gymnastics club have just performed in honor of Gullen’s esteemed (and very rich) guest. Before the festivities recommence, Claire announces that she will be divorcing her husband and marrying a German movie star, only because she would like to satisfy her childhood wish of marrying in Gullen’s cathedral.

The announcement catches the Gulleners off-guard, but their suspicions of Claire are quickly forgotten when the Mayor finally gives the speech he prepared earlier in the act. The speech is long and brown-nosing, insincerely lionizing Claire for her intelligence, justness, and goodwill in an obvious appeal to her vanity and charity. Claire thanks the Mayor for his speech, but then curtly points out that she has never been the altruistic saint the Mayor has made her out to be.

Nevertheless, Claire says, she *does* want to help Gullen. She announces then and there at the banquet that she is prepared to donate one billion—half to the town and half to be split equally amongst the families. The Gulleners are first too stunned to speak, but then gradually—prematurely—erupt into jubilation, celebrating their apparent financial salvation. But, of course, nothing in life is free and Claire’s offer is conditional: “with that billion,” she says, “I will buy myself justice.” The Mayor counters that justice cannot be bought, at which Claire scoffs, “Everything can be bought.”

She summons Bobby the Butler to make her point. As soon as the man removes his dark glasses, the Teacher recognizes him as Gullen’s former Chief Justice Hofer. The Butler proceeds to explain that he entered Claire’s service twenty-five years ago, lured away from a prestigious post at Kaffigen’s Court of Appeal by the massive salary she offered him.

*When Ill asks Claire if she is “artificial,” he refers to her grotesque and plastic beauty. But Claire’s affected appearance also extends to her personality—her every action is calculated, and her compassion for others is non-existent.*



*Claire demonstrates, once again, a total lack of respect for her husband’s individuality. For her, a husband is a faceless pawn in her game—someone she uses to satisfy her own whims.*



*Claire is quick to point out the untruths in the Mayor’s concocted speech and exposes his cash-grab tactics for what they are. Her disarming honesty is a calculated display of strength: it makes the Gulleners feel embarrassed and unsure of themselves while making Claire seem powerful and self-possessed (i.e. difficult to manipulate).*



*Claire’s one billion dollar offer and cryptic demand represent another display of power, meant to stun and subordinate the Gulleners. Her remarks raise the questions at the heart of the play: what is “justice”? Can it be bought? Is there anything that can’t?*



*Claire proves (again) that money can buy justice; she effectively bought a judge’s loyalty with the offer of a large salary.*



The Butler continues: when he was the Chief Justice of Gllen, he arbitrated a paternity case that a seventeen-year-old Claire had brought against Ill. Ill falsely denied fathering Claire’s love child, and brought two witnesses to corroborate his claim, leading an unwitting Bobby to decide in his favor. These witnesses were none other than Koby and Loby, then Jakob Duckling and Walter Perch. The odd pair step forward and confess to having undermined Claire’s case by falsely claiming to have slept with her. They did so, they say, because Ill bribed them with a quart of schnapps. Years later, a vengeful Claire tracked down the perjurers (who were by that point living in Canada and Australia, respectively), and had them castrated and blinded.

Claire explains that she left Gllen following the trial and fell into prostitution to support herself and her child (who only lived for a year). When asked why she became a prostitute, Claire responds: “The court’s verdict turned me into one.”

After a lengthy digression, Claire finally announces the only condition Gllen must satisfy before receiving her billion-dollar endowment: someone must kill Alfred Ill, the man that wronged her.

The Mayor, speaking on behalf of his mortified constituents, immediately and emphatically refuses Claire’s offer, citing the town’s commitment to a rich humanistic tradition that values human life over capital. The Glleners applaud his speech, but are interrupted by Claire, who ominously announces that she “can wait” (presumably for the villagers to succumb to the influence and allure of her money).

## ACT 2

The act opens with a view of Claire’s balcony at the dilapidated Golden Apostle Inn, foregrounded by Ill’s general store opposite what seems to be the Policeman’s office.

These three locations are visually linked by Roby and Toby ominously carrying wreaths and flowers across the stage to place on the **empty coffin** Claire brought with her to Gllen. Ill anxiously looks on through the window of his shop, worrying that the ritual will remind Glleners of their option to kill him, but he reassures himself that the town is on his side.

*For Claire, justice and vengeance are one and the same. She is an ethical egoist, driven by self-interest and operating according to her own sense of right and wrong (where revenge is “right”). As she herself acknowledges, it is her wealth that licenses her to act accordingly. While her powers are not supernatural, the sheer magnitude of her resources does make her somewhat otherworldly: an “indestructible,” all-seeing figure, able to track down her slanderers to ends of the earth.*



*Hardly anything in the play holds up against market forces. Physical bodies (e.g. Claire’s sexuality and, later, Ill’s corpse) and abstract ideals (e.g. love and justice) alike are but commodities, sold to the highest bidder.*



*Claire was forced into her life, now she wants to force Ill into his death.*



*The Mayor rejects the offer “in the name of the town of Gllen... In the name of humanity.” Here, the repetition of the phrase “in the name of” suggests an equivalency between Gllen and humanism, as if the town itself embodies civic virtue and humanitarianism.*



*The scene visually articulates Claire’s power over the Glleners: on high she watches them fall into the traps she’s laid out.*



*Roby and Toby’s processions are, of course, unnerving, but they are also direct, wordless, and less disturbing than the disingenuousness of other rituals in Gllen, such as Claire’s welcome celebration.*



Ill momentarily turns his thoughts away from the price on his head and speaks briefly with his son and daughter. They announce that they will head to the railway station and Labor Exchange, respectively, in search of work. Ill sees them off.

*The children's difficulty finding work reestablishes the direness of G\u00fcllen's economic situation. This will also later contrast his son and daughter's extravagant wealth.*



As Ill's children leave the shop, a townsman enters looking to buy cigarettes—a more expensive brand than usual. When Ill alerts him of the additional cost, the man asks Ill to charge the purchase to credit. Two more customers (the First and Second Women) enter, and buy richer milk and butter than usual, and even indulge in bread and chocolate. Like the man before them, they make their purchases on credit.

*It begins—the G\u00fclleners who so boldly defended Ill not ten minutes of stage time before, are starting to succumb to the allure of the wealth Claire has conditionally promised them. Their "humanism" seems no match for market forces—or for the taste of chocolate!*



Meanwhile, Claire's entourage tries to appease their demanding mistress: Bobby the Butler searches for her prosthetic leg, while Roby strums folk tunes she requests on guitar. Claire contemplates her upcoming wedding, not a week after her divorce from Moby. This leads her to recall her former husbands. She expresses particular admiration for her first husband—the oil tycoon Zochanassian whom she met when she was a prostitute—after whom she modeled her own persona. She also derisively pities "poor Moby," and mockingly "honors" him by smoking a cigar made with tobacco from the plantations she acquired from him during their divorce.

*The way that Claire uses the people around her reflects her deep disregard for the humanity of others. It's also notable that Claire attributes her persona to her first husband, whom Ill's betrayal led her to marry. It was Zochanassian's ruthless capitalism that has allowed Claire to live a life in which she understands everything, even justice, to be for sale. For Claire, the way to never be betrayed and powerless again is to be ruthless.*



Ill and his customers look on, condemning Claire for sitting high and mighty on her balcony and smoking such expensive cigars. "Conspicuous consumption," they call it. "In full view of destitute humanity."

*The customers disparage Claire for indulging in what they can't. Their rebukes only thinly veil their envy.*



Another customer then enters the shop, prompting Ill to comment on the unusually high number of customers he's had this morning. The customers all assure him that they are visiting his shop in solidarity with him against Claire's offer—he is, after all, the most popular man in town, and G\u00fcllen's Mayor-to-be!

*Ill starts to register a dissonance between the G\u00fclleners' words and actions. He seems to sense that the customers all feel like shopping because they are expecting to receive Claire's money soon, even as they insist to Ill that they stand behind him.*



A half-naked girl—Miss Louise—suddenly bursts across stage, playfully pursued by Toby. The lady customers in Ill's shop momentarily turn their derisive gaze from Claire to Louise, continuing to eat their chocolate all the while.

*The customers' judgmental actions are ironic; they may not be traipsing around in the nude with Claire's goons, but they are essentially whoring themselves in the same way, standing there indulging in things they'd never be able to afford without Claire's money.*



Back at the Golden Apostle, we see Claire's soon-to-be eighth husband join her on her balcony. (A stage direction allows the same actor that played Husband VII to play Husband VIII.) Claire can hardly stand him. He comments on the apparent nervous energy of the Gülleners, unaware of Claire's plan and the anxiety it has caused.

The play cuts back to the shop, where Ill has suddenly noticed that all his customers are wearing new **yellow shoes**. This development, on top of his customers' exorbitant purchases on credit, alerts Ill to an economic fact that might spell his own doom: the greater the Gülleners' debts, the greater their need to kill Ill for Claire's money.

A nervous Ill rushes out of his shop to the Policeman, demanding that he arrest Claire for inciting his murder. The Policeman downplays Ill's concerns, assuring him that no one in town is taking Claire seriously. But when Ill notices that the Policeman is himself wearing the same new **yellow shoes**—and sporting a new gold tooth—he recognizes that the Policeman, like the customers, has succumbed to the lure of material gain (if not yet the willingness to murder for money). An exasperated Ill challenges the officer, but the Policeman abruptly ends their conversation, explaining that Claire's **black panther** has escaped and that he must hunt it down. "The whole town has to hunt it down," he adds.

Only more desperate after his disconcerting conversation with the Policeman, Ill heads for the Mayor's office. When Ill arrives, he notices the bureaucrat casually handling a revolver. The Mayor explains away the gun, indicating that he has only armed himself in case Claire's escaped **panther** approaches him. Ill remains suspicious of the Mayor (whom he notices is also smoking a more-expensive-than-usual brand of cigarettes and wearing those same ominous **yellow shoes**), but nevertheless Ill pleads with the Mayor for protection. The Mayor dismisses Ill's concerns and chides him for his faithlessness: "You forget that you're in Güllen. A town with a humanist tradition. [...] If you're unable to place any trust in our community, I pity you." The Mayor goes on to chastise Ill for his perjury during Claire's paternity trial, and informs him that he has been disqualified from running for Mayor on account of this crime. When Ill notices a blueprint for a new building on the Mayor's wall, however, he interprets the Mayor's admonitions as yet another sign of the tide of public opinion in Güllen turning against him.

*A director might cast the same actor in all the husbands' roles, a choice which would deny the characters any individuality (much in the same way that Claire does)—VIII is but the next in a long line of nameless, faceless husbands to be used, then discarded. His banal observations further emphasize his indistinction.*



*With every new purchase, the Gülleners raise the price on Ill's head, and thus further dehumanize him to the level of a commodity. The shoes, as bright and highly visible symbols for the Gülleners' increasing debts, signal the rise of consumerism in their town at the expense of Ill's life and humanity.*



*Ill's paranoia is vindicated by the Policeman's vague dismissals and recent purchases. It seems that the law (represented by the Policeman) is less motivated to maintain law and order in Güllen than to indulge in luxury. Furthermore, the Policeman's subtly threatening remarks about the hunt for the panther roaming Güllen suggest in veiled terms that "the whole town" will be hunting Ill next. Nevertheless, the Policeman denies any plot against Ill.*



*The government in Güllen (represented by the Mayor) also seems to have compromised on its commitment to justice—at least, "justice" as the Mayor described it at the end of Act I. The Mayor denies that Ill has any cause for concern, going so far as to shame him for doubting the compassion of his community. The Mayor also bars Ill from the Mayorship on account of his mistreatment of Claire years ago. But the Mayor's rebukes are clearly disingenuous; his dismissals and vague threats, not to mention his indulgences (i.e. the blueprint, the cigarettes, the shoes, and the gun) suggest that Güllen's once humanitarian Mayor now cares more for money than for human life, dignity, and well-being.*



As Ill downheartedly takes leave of the Mayor's office, we cut once again to the balcony of the Golden Apostle Inn, where Claire is having breakfast with her fiancée. He dolefully shares that Gullen depresses him: it lacks "grandeur" and "tragedy," he says. There is no drama or discomfort to make life there interesting; the town has "none of the ethical calling of a great age."

We shift back to Ill, who has now come to plead with Gullen's Pastor. The Pastor, like the Mayor, totes a shotgun with which to defend himself from Claire's **panther**. When Ill shares his concerns about the potentially malevolent intentions of the townsfolk, the Pastor suggests that Ill is merely imputing to others the guilt and disdain he feels toward himself for having abandoned Claire. The Pastor encourages Ill not to worry, but to find peace with himself. Ill starts to reiterate his concerns about the Gulleners' outrageous spending, but is interrupted by the toll of a new bell the Pastor has bought for the church. With that, Ill realizes to his horror that even Gullen's spiritual guide has been seized by an earthly desire for wealth and luxury, and may therefore agree to Claire's terms.

Suddenly, two shots are fired and the startled Pastor briefly recovers his moral clarity. He urges Ill to leave town before he and the Gulleners commit some greater treachery than buying new shoes or cigarettes or bells. His exhortations of "Flee! Flee!" are drowned out by the reverberations of the gunshots, which apparently finished off the escaped **panther**.

Claire mourns her pet, and the Gulleners assemble before her balcony to offer their condolences. But before the townspeople have the opportunity to sing their dirge for the panther, Ill interrupts them, paranoid that they are singing the funeral song for him. He dismisses the other Gulleners from the scene, leaving him alone with Claire. He is below on the street, and she is above on her balcony. Claire recalls that their love began in a similar way: she was also on a balcony the day that Ill first laid eyes on her. His stare was intense, she remembers—"almost sinister, almost evil," yet "full of love." Her memories fail to charm Ill, who only wants to know if Claire's bargain of his life for a billion dollars is serious. He asks. She does not answer.

*The irony of the fiancée's claims is painfully clear to the audience, who, unlike him, is aware of the great and tragic "ethical calling" the town is facing.*



*Seeking help in an increasingly hostile Gullen, Ill turns to the Pastor. Perhaps he hopes that the Church—an institution ostensibly less invested in earthly affairs (e.g. Claire's money) than in matters of morality—can temper the rising tide of ill will toward Ill in town. But Ill soon learns that even Gullen's Church—under its veneer of sanctity and human compassion—is an institution like any other in the town, motivated not by any genuine pursuit of justice or enlightenment, but by the desire for wealth and power.*



*Not long after defending the value of life, the Gulleners have become ruthless killers, hunting an animal desperate for freedom. The cat's death doesn't bode well for an increasingly dehumanized and preyed-upon Ill (who is Claire's other "black panther"). This time, the shock of violence temporarily lifts the veil of denial from over Gullen; faced by real death, the guilty Pastor exposes his town's motivations for what they are and urges Ill to flee.*



*This scene is a parodic reconstruction of the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet. It takes the pure, wanton love from Shakespeare's play and turns it into something dark and charged with tension. It also introduces the idea that "love" can be sinister. This idea recurs in the next act when Claire tells Ill that she never stopped loving him—that by collecting his corpse, she hopes to finally possess him.*



The next morning, Ill heads for the railway station with his suitcase, intending to catch the next train out of town. As he waits for his train, he notices first that the station has been updated a bit, then that the citizens of Gullen have begun to approach him from all sides. They overwhelm him with questions and comments obviously meant to discourage him from skipping town. But when Ill once again expresses his suspicions, the townspeople assure him that no one will harm him. As the train pulls up to the station, the Gulleners bid Ill farewell, but continue to crowd closer and closer around him. Intimidated, Ill finds himself unable to board the train, convinced that someone would hold him back if he did. He collapses as the train departs and fatalistically cries, "It's all over!"

*Dürrenmatt's stage direction places Ill at the center of the mob forming around him. This image is repeated in the play's final scene, when the Gulleners kill Ill. Visually, these scenes reflect Ill's central role in everything that has happened in Gullen—it was his betrayal of Claire that has set all these events in motion (including, Dürrenmatt reveals later, Gullen's economic decline). Ill's fate (life or death) is intertwined with Gullen's; for this reason, Ill feels that it would be impossible—or at least pointless—to leave town.*



### ACT 3

Claire sits alone—completely motionless and wearing her wedding garb—in the Petersen's barn on the outskirts of Gullen. The barn is strewn with enormous spiderwebs, and apparently is so dark that the Doctor and Teacher, who have come to visit Claire, struggle to find her. She tells the men that she retired to the barn seeking "peace and quiet" after the strain of her wedding, which she is already in the process of annulling.

*The act opens on Claire looking every bit the part of a master manipulator: she sits literally and metaphorically at the dark center of a web, waiting for prey (i.e. the townspeople of Gullen) to fall into her trap. Her calculated lack of regard for others is only emphasized by the apparent ease with which she discards her new husband.*



The Teacher and Doctor announce that they have come to Claire to discuss her offer: they explain that the townspeople have recently drawn up exorbitant debts and now need her help more than ever, but they still refuse to kill Ill on account of their "Western principles." They plead with Claire to revise her offer—to buy up and invest in Gullen's industries, which would not only reintroduce paying jobs to the town and lower its debts, but also produce returns for the billionaire. It would be a win-win situation.

*As the Teacher and Doctor indicate, the Gulleners drew up debts in anticipation of Claire's donation without taking her terms seriously. Now, they assume that they can negotiate with Claire—that, in the end, she will help them even if they don't kill Ill, if not out of goodwill, then for the profits she could make by buying up the town's factories.*



But to the horror of the Teacher and Doctor, Claire informs them that she *already* owns Gullen's industrial sites—and that it was she who orchestrated their collapse in the first place. She wanted to make Gullen desperate, just as she had been after the town had abandoned her and labeled her a whore. Now, she reminds the men, *she* is in control and she wants Ill dead. The Teacher protests, invoking human kindness as a reason for Claire to abandon her decades-old vendetta, but the billionaire scoffs at him: "Human kindness [...] is made for the purses of millionaires."

*The revelation that Claire has no vested interest in helping Gullen—that she intentionally ruined the town so that she could force the townspeople to kill Ill—makes the Teacher and Doctor recognize the folly of ever believing they could negotiate with a woman who already has everything. The helplessness of the Gulleners' situation sets the play on a course to its tragic and inevitable conclusion.*



Claire takes leave of the disheartened Teacher and Doctor and we cut to Ill's general store. The once dingy and dated shop is now immaculate and it has updated its stock, sign, and counter. Ill's wife runs the store and gossips with her customers, who continue to buy luxury items on credit. Mrs. Ill comments that she is happy Claire's wedding went well; "Claire deserves some happiness after all that misery" in her youth, she says. Mrs. Ill's positive outlook sours when she sees Miss Louise cross the stage wearing fashionable clothing; Ill's wife condemns the woman's extravagance.

We learn from Mrs. Ill that her husband has cloistered himself above his shop, and has been nervously pacing the floor for several days. The customers in the shop suggest that Ill's own conscience is the root of his anxiety; they expect he must feel terrible for having tricked "poor Mrs. Zachanassian." The customers also discourage anyone from mentioning Ill's situation to the newly-arrived journalists covering Claire's wedding and visit.

The Teacher enters the shop and begins to drink heavily. The other customers in the shop decline to join him—or to drink at all—until the journalists have left town. They continue to make purchases and strategize avoiding the press, briefly pausing only to condemn the extravagance of the chocolate-eating women from Act II when they walk by in expensive clothing.

Two journalists arrive at the general store and abruptly begin interviewing the gossiping Gülleners, hoping to gauge their reactions to Claire's visit. The villagers respond with calculated enthusiasm, being sure not to say anything negative about Claire. But they are thrown off when the journalists begin to ask Mrs. Ill about the love triangle involving her, Ill, and Claire forty-five years ago. Hoping the journalists don't know the story behind Ill's separation from Claire, Mrs. Ill nervously asks the journalists what they've heard about Ill and Claire's romance. She is relieved to find that the journalists think Ill left Claire not because she was poor and pregnant, but because he fell in love with someone else (i.e. his current wife). Mrs. Ill confirms the story, reiterating that she and Ill married for love, and that her husband does not regret leaving Claire, despite her relatively newfound wealth: "Money alone makes no one happy," says Mrs. Ill. The journalists copy the maxim into their notes.

*Back at Ill's store, we see that the tide of public opinion has changed in Claire's favor. The billionaire's extravagances now provoke compassion rather than derision, as they did in Act II when Claire smoked her fancy cigar. Miss Louise, however, remains an object of contempt; the townspeople scapegoat her, hypocritically calling her imprudent, even as they themselves indulge in things they can't afford.*



*Just as the Gülleners have started painting Claire in a favorable light, they now look to the once-beloved Ill with disdain. This shows just how deeply justice can be bought. Not only are the townspeople ultimately willing to kill Ill for money, but they are also willing to assume a moral posture that justifies their act and vindicates Claire for her cruel directive.*



*The townspeople of Gullen, continue to deny that they would kill Ill, and they deride others for indulging in luxury in anticipation of Claire's donation. In an interesting reversal, they disparage the women who themselves criticized Miss Louise in Act II.*



*Even Ill's family won't publicize the terms of Claire's offer (and thereby lose their chance to claim her donation). Her claims that she and Ill married for love rather than for money are not true: the audience knows that Ill married her as a means of insuring his own financial stability, and that Mrs. Ill now plans to betray her husband for Claire's money. However, the fact that Mrs. Ill insists to the journalists that they married for love shows how important it is to Gülleners to maintain a humanist veneer (rather than reveal the actual capitalist depravity that is underway). Just as the Gülleners pervert their notion of justice to pretend that killing Ill isn't about money, Mrs. Ill frames her relationship as based on love in order not to admit that it was a financial decision. Thus, just as Ill betrayed Claire for money, the town is about to betray Ill for money a financial decision. Thus, just as Ill betrayed Claire for money, the town is about to betray Ill for money.*



Up to this point, the Teacher has been not only drinking heavily, but also growing increasingly perturbed by the Gülleners' dishonesty with the journalists. Now drunk and uninhibited, he rouses himself to expose their scheming and lying, launching into a lofty speech about the true nature of Claire's visit. The other Gülleners attempt to silence him before he can lay bare their betrayals and Claire's blood-thirst, but all are interrupted by Ill's entrance. The Gülleners worry that Ill might tell the journalists about the price on his head, thereby destroying the town's chances of securing Claire's endowment. The Teacher takes advantage of their shocked silence and attempts once more to tell the press the truth about Claire's visit, but Ill inexplicably discourages him.

When a photographer passing by the general store announces that Claire has found a ninth husband only a few hours after marrying (then divorcing) her eighth, the journalists rush out of the shop. Not long after, Ill's wife and her customers also take off, leaving Ill and the Teacher alone. The Teacher tells Ill that he was trying to help him, to tell the press how Claire's "disgraceful billion" is ruining Güllen, but Ill once again resigns himself to the town's judgment and discourages the Teacher from advocating for him. "After all," he says, Güllen's downfall and Claire's anger are "my fault."

Ill's resignation sobers the Teacher, who recognizes that, in a way, Ill is to blame for Güllen's dire current situation. He goes on to confirm Ill's suspicions that the townspeople will kill him—though Gülleners continue to claim otherwise, it was inevitable that the promise of a better life would coax them (the Teacher included) into contemplating murder. Any amount of "faith in humanity is powerless" to stop the murder, says the Teacher before charging another bottle of liquor to credit and leaving the shop.

Mrs. Ill and Ill's son and daughter return to the shop. Ill observes that his daughter now takes tennis lessons, his son drives a new car, and his wife wears a new fur coat. The trio tells him that he need not worry about the purchases (which were made on credit), assuring him that Claire is too "good-hearted" to actually want him dead, and she will help the town out even if he stays alive. Ill seems unconvinced, but nevertheless he tells the trio that he would like to take a ride with them in the new car, "just once."

*The Teacher is at this point the only Güllener fighting to defend his town's so-called "humanist" values (and, by extension, Ill's life). The other townspeople are quick to turn against him, as their desperation and desire for money are now guiding their actions. This moment articulates the great irony of the play: Ill's desertion of Claire for small material gain is now mirrored in the Gülleners' unanimous rejection of Ill (and anyone else that threatens their new, luxurious lifestyle).*



*Ill's newfound accountability for his mistreatment of Claire forty-five years ago marks a major turning point in the play. With no other recourse, he has stopped trying to justify his actions, and has started to acknowledge the pain he caused Claire for what it is. This change heralds the start of Ill's transformation from "a grimy, petty shopkeeper" into a hero truly more committed to justice (as accountability) than to his own self-interest.*



*Among the people of Güllen (Ill excepted), the Teacher alone acknowledges the moral decline of his community for what it is. Nevertheless, he is unable to resist the draw of Claire's billion—he admits that he is too poor to privilege his abstract ideals over his desire for financial stability.*



*This scene echoes the Ill family conversation that opened Act II; now, however, Ill's children spend their days engaged in leisure activities rather than searching for work. Before, Ill would have feared their indulgence in luxury items, but now he resignedly embraces the family's growing prosperity, even if it signals their readiness to betray him.*



The three scatter to prepare for the trip just before the Mayor enters the shop to speak to Ill. He has apparently come to offer Ill a gun ahead of a public meeting scheduled for that evening, during which Güllen will discuss Claire's offer. When the Mayor asks Ill if he will submit to the town's judgment, Ill indicates that he will; but when the Mayor suggests that Ill spare the town the burden of making a difficult decision by turning the gun on himself, Ill refuses. He declares that he has taken responsibility for his crimes and will submit to punishment for them. He expects the town to demonstrate the same accountability: "your action is yours," he tells the Mayor, "and I can't relieve you of it." The Mayor takes back the gun, insults Ill, and leaves.

Ill's family returns wearing their fineries and they pile into their new car with Ill. As they drive through Güllen, they point out various improvements the town has undergone: new eateries, housing developments, and industrial sites line its formerly ramshackle and empty streets. Distracted, Ill's son takes a wrong turn; the family decides to return to town through the woods of Konradswiel (again indicated by the four men posing as trees). Ill's wife, daughter, and son decide that they would like to go see a movie before the public assembly, but Ill remarks that he would rather take a walk in the woods. He disembarks from the car, makes his way over to a bench, and watches his family drive off.

Coincidentally, Claire is also in the woods, together with her new (ninth) husband and entourage (minus Koby and Loby, whom she shipped off to Hong Kong when they started to bother her). She dismisses her retinue when she discovers Ill, hoping to spend some time with him. Despite everything that has happened, the two share a warm and tragic conversation, full of nostalgia for things they only fleetingly had. Claire reveals that their newborn was taken away by a welfare organization and died a year later, and Ill recalls how deeply he once loved Claire. The two then turn their thoughts away from the past and toward the future. Ill tells Claire that he accepts his death, and she tells him that she will entomb him in a mausoleum on her estate in Italy so that he remains close to her. She adds that she still loves Ill, in a way. By "destroying" him, she hopes to "change the past," and even realize her dream of having a life with him. The two part amicably, and Ill heads to the Golden Apostle for his "trial."

Güllens' community meeting begins. The entire town is there, as are swarms of reporters that are anticipating an announcement the Mayor will make in Claire's name. The Mayor welcomes everyone, then announces that Claire intends to donate one billion dollars to Güllen. The townspeople are dead silent, a response which the reporters interpret as shock.

*Ill has finally accepted his own fate, but he will not make it easy for the town to go ahead with their reprehensible choice. Ill's speech here shows that while he accepts that "justice" is in the hands of the town and he must accept their decision, he also realizes that their decision is immoral. The Mayor wants Claire's money, but would rather not dirty his hands; Ill refuses to grant him any such privilege, requiring the town to fully commit to their choice.*



*The Ills' whirlwind tour of Güllen and its surrounding parts reveals the extent to which the town's standard of living—and debt—have grown. Even Ill's own family has betrayed him by going into debt, and here he seems to reject their new lifestyle by refusing to go to the movies (a commercial activity) and instead walking in the woods, which he associates with a simpler time in his life.*



*This meeting between Claire and Ill mirrors their meeting in Act I, which also took place in the woods. This time around, Ill no longer plays the part of a salesman; he demonstrates a genuine interest in reconciling with Claire ahead of his trial and likely execution. Claire's unrequited love for Ill has warped, over the years, into something else—a desire to possess him completely, to manufacture his demise and control his dead body. Already she has chosen a plot for his corpse: a mausoleum on her estate. There, he will remain eternally close to her. This proximity allows Claire to finally control the terms of her relationship with Ill.*



*Here, we encounter another instance in which appearance and reality diverge. The Gülleners' silence does not indicate shock, as the journalists believe, but rather their solemn anticipation of Ill's murder.*



The Teacher takes the stage and cryptically reminds the town that the donation will not come cheaply. The purpose of the billion is not to “make us happy,” he says, but to make Gullen “a just community.” When he urges his fellow townspeople to accept Claire’s offer and the conditions attached, they cheer him on. The press, blithely unaware of what these conditions stipulate, celebrate the Gulleners’ moral excellence and Claire’s generosity.

The Mayor once again takes the floor and he asks Ill if he will respect the town’s decision to accept Claire’s offer. Ill responds in the affirmative. No one protests when the Mayor invites objections—not the Pastor or the Doctor or the Policeman—and the matter of accepting Claire’s offer moves to a final vote. “All those who sincerely want justice done,” the Mayor says, “raise your hands.” All the Gulleners (besides Ill) accept The Claire Zachanassian Endowment—“not for the sake of money...but for the sake of justice,” they repeat almost religiously, as if trying to allay their conscience.

A disheartened Ill pleads with God, which the journalists’ interpret as a cry of joy. The press asks the townspeople to restage their vote for the cameras, and they do, but Ill refuses to cry out to God again.

Following the staged vote, the Mayor invites the pressmen to a reception in the restaurant of the Golden Apostle. The Gulleners stay behind in the auditorium, and descend upon Ill once all the journalists have left. They offer Ill a cigarette and their prayers, but Ill hopes that they will pray for themselves. With that, the townspeople kill him. When the journalists return to the auditorium, the Gulleners alert them that Ill has “died of joy”—that all the excitement about Claire’s donation made his heart give out. The journalists accept the story without question.

Claire enters and collects the body. When she examines Ill’s corpse, she sees the boy she loved forty-five years ago—her dear “**black panther**.” She has the body put in her **coffin** and, true to her word, she grants Gullen the billion dollars she promised.

*The speech is rhetorically similar to the Mayor’s refusal of Claire’s offer in Act I; it celebrates “Western” ideals, renounces material gain, and calls for justice. Here, however, “justice” is sentencing Ill to die, whereas before it was the opposite.*



*The Gullenian institutions responsible for fashioning and upholding an idea of “justice” ultimately do nothing to stop the town from committing a heinous act. Furthermore, there’s a chilling groupthink at work in this scene, in which the townspeople repeat the mayor’s lofty words verbatim—words which are so clearly at odds with the violence and cruelty of the moment. This shows how thoroughly the town’s morals have been corrupted by money.*



*Ill loses faith when his prayers to God are parodically answered by a journalist asking the townspeople to restage their vote. This indirectly reaffirms their commitment to killing Ill.*



*The Gulleners moment of reckoning finally comes, and they follow through with Ill’s murder. It seems they have fully convinced themselves of Ill’s culpability and the justness of his punishment, but we, the audience, know that their criminalization of Ill is a form of self-justification—a righteous cover under which they hope to hide their own moral lapse into murder and greed.*



*Now dead and without a will of his own, Ill is putty in the hands of Claire. He finally belongs to her, and she can mold him into whatever she’d like.*



The billionaire leaves Gullen for the railway station. In her wake, the town undergoes a rapid transformation: its once oppressively drab atmosphere now gleams and glitters, its townspeople now wear evening gowns and tuxedos rather than rags. In the style of a Greek tragedy, the Gulleners form two choruses and celebrate their newfound prosperity. They watch Claire as she boards her express train accompanied by her “noble entourage”—her husband, her attendants, and now the body of Alfred III.

*This final scene reverses the play’s opening: the Gulleners are no longer poor and awaiting Claire’s arrival, but rich and seeing her off. Yet, in a way, nothing in Gullen has changed; just as its inhabitants were once enslaved by poverty, now they are indentured to wealth. They were so desperate for luxury that they betrayed their values and killed their friend.*





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