

The uses of sight in the visit



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *The Visit*, by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the fictional town of Gullen is turned on its head by the proposal of immense wealth from benefactress Claire Zachanassian, who returns to her hometown for a visit. However, in order to receive this money, the citizens must murder one of their own, a man named Alfred III. While the citizens first decide not to break their moral codes by committing a murder, they all slowly become metaphorically “blind” to a harsh reality: money means more to them than high morality. While the citizens try to justify their actions by dubbing III as a twisted man for what he did to Claire when they were young, what he did in his past does not mean he deserves to be murdered, which the citizens of Gullen do not comprehend. The uses of sight throughout the drama show the citizens’ eventual downward spiral into greed and bloodlust. In *The Visit*, by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the lack of physical and metaphorical sight throughout the town of Gullen foreshadows Alfred III’s murder, and symbolizes the town’s ability to become blind to the sin they have committed.

Throughout the entirety of the drama, Dürrenmatt uses sight to foreshadow aspects of III’s murder before they happen. The clearest example of III’s death being foreshadowed comes when Claire first steps off the train into Gullen. From her and III’s first conversation when she arrives, it is revealed that Claire used to call III her “black panther” when they were teenagers. While this conversation is happening, Claire’s butler Moby and her brutes Roby and Toby carry her stuff off of the train. Along with her luggage and a large coffin, Claire brings along a caged black panther. The animal is carried in its confines to the Golden Apostle, and later in Act II, the panther somehow gets free. The citizens, who are all now equipped with large guns,

begin the search to hunt and kill the panther. After Ill has conversations with both the Mayor and the Policeman concerning Claire's offer, who both reply with feeble promises to remain on Ill's side, someone kills the panther in front of Ill's store. No one but Ill sees the meaning behind this event: by killing the panther, they are foreshadowing his murder. Ill attempts to reveal his feelings to some of the town members when they are holding a funeral march for the panther, boldly saying, " It's for my death you're practicing this song, for my death!" (Dürrenmatt 60). The townspeople deny Ill's accusations and accuse him of overreacting to the situation, when in reality he had every right to fear for his life. Dürrenmatt includes the symbol of the black panther to represent how easy it is for the citizens to blindly succumb to their greed. Claire brings the panther with her to symbolize Ill, and most likely released the panther herself to indirectly trick the townspeople into playing along with her game. Considering the fact that no one but Ill sees through such a blunt metaphor, it seems as though the townspeople are too blind to realize that they are about to commit a mortal sin for the acquisition of immense wealth and prosperity for their town. Another example of Ill's death being foreshadowed occurs when Claire first meets the Doctor. When Claire meets Doctor Nüsslin, she asks him about certain aspects of his job:

CLAIRE. Interesting. Do you prepare death certificates?

DOCTOR. Death certificates?

CLAIRE. When someone loses his life.

DOCTOR. Yes, I do.

CLAIRE. Next time you determine the cause of death, make it a heart attack (17).

In Act III, shortly after the men of Güllen murder III, Doctor Nüsslin arises from the crowd of men to name the cause of III's death, declaring, "Heart attack" (109). This blatant foreshadowing by Claire reveals that she likely planned out every aspect of III's murder before she arrived in town. From bringing a coffin with her, to releasing the panther to be hunted and killed by the citizens, it can be gathered that Claire knew she wanted III dead before she stepped off the train. It can be argued that Claire wanted people to see through her foreshadowing attempts, as she made them very obvious, but since the townspeople eventually changed their minds and murdered III, her wish ends up being granted. Throughout *The Visit*, III's death is foreshadowed multiple times, both by the townspeople and Claire Zachanassian alike.

The citizens of Güllen are metaphorically blinded to the true extent of their greed after hearing Claire Zachanassian's offer to solve their financial problems. When Claire first offers the town of Güllen one billion dollars to be divided amongst the citizens and the town, they are thrilled at the prospect of being pulled out of their financial hardship. This proposal causes the town to become "blinded" by their greed. While the citizens are busy with fantasies of how they will spend money they receive in this proposal, Claire begins to tell them about her history with III. She tells them about how she and III had conceived a child when they were teenagers, and III denied paternity when brought to court for his actions. She then brings out the two blind eunuchs, Koby and Loby, whom she brought with her to Güllen as well.

They share that Ill bribed them with a quart of schnapps to lie in front of the judge and say that they were the father of Claire's child. After they reveal these details, Claire asks them to describe their punishment for the crime:

CLAIRE. Now tell them what I did to you, Koby and Loby.

BUTLER. Tell them.

THE PAIR. The lady tracked us down, the lady tracked us down.

BUTLER. That's right. Claire Zachanassian tracked you down. Sent out search parties for you all over the world. Jakob Duckling had emigrated to Canada, Walter Perch to Australia. But she found you. And what did she do with you then?

THE PAIR. She gave us to Toby and Roby, she gave us to Toby and Roby

BUTLER. And what did Toby and Roby do to you?

THE PAIR. Castrated and blinded us, castrated and blinded us (33-34).

During this conversation, it is confessed that Claire blinded these men for committing perjury when she was a teenager. When Koby and Loby committed perjury, they were "blinding" themselves to the reality of the situation they were involved in. Although this was a conscious choice made by the pair, the fact that they went through with it to begin with and were literally blinded as a result shows how they were metaphorically blinded by their greed. An important comparison can be drawn between the citizens of Güllen and Koby and Loby: they are both blinded to the truth by their greed. While the citizens' greed is much larger in comparison to Koby and Loby's,

the similarities vastly outweigh the differences. Dürrenmatt includes this comparison to show how greed can easily blind people and make them do terrible things; in the citizens' case, it is the murder of Ill, and in Koby and Loby's case, it is the act of committing perjury. The citizens' blindness to the reality of the situation continues throughout the drama when they continue to buy expensive items on credit at Ill's store. Only Ill seems to take notice of the fact that the citizens are using money they don't actually have, and realizes quickly that they are going to murder him after 6all to gain the fortune and pay off their debts. The townspeople never take notice to the fact that they are spending all of this nonexistent money, as they are so blinded by the prospect of having actual money that they take little notice of anything else. In the end, no citizen of Gullen saw through their blindness except the Teacher, who becomes an alcoholic because he cannot deal with the burden of his greed. Throughout *The Visit*, the citizens of Gullen are metaphorically blinded to the true extent of their greed, which leads to the murder of Ill.

In *The Visit*, Dürrenmatt uses sight as a way to foreshadow Ill's death, and to show the citizens' greed when concerning the hefty fortune they receive for murdering Ill. He uses well-constructed symbols and metaphors to show how such a destitute town as Gullen can become so obsessed with the idea of being above the poverty line that they will do anything to make it happen, including killing a man. Throughout this drama, Dürrenmatt makes exceptional use of a popular cliché concerning wealth: more money, more problems. When faced with the possible addition of one billion dollars, the town warps into a frenzy of greed, which eventually leads to the bloodlust

that convinced them to murder III. In *The Visit*, by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, sight is used throughout the drama both to reveal the true extent of the greed of the citizens of Gullen, and to foreshadow Alfred III's eventual murder.