

# The effect of dehumanization in the visit



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Dürrenmatt draws attention to loss of human qualities and the innate flaws of humans in his play *The Visit*. He does so by making the aim of the protagonist, Claire Zachanassian, to avenge the false testament given in court by Alfred III when he denied being the father of her child.

Subsequently, Dürrenmatt shows a negative transformation in the morals upheld by the townsmen of Guellen, as a result of their desire for wealth. The negative transformation results in the desensitization of the townsmen.

These events lead to the creation of many questions for the audience to think about, such as “ Can justice be bought?” and “ When does the need for justice become something more malicious, like revenge?” Once it becomes clear to the audience the tragic event which occurred in Claire’s life because of Alfred III, the audience immediately feels sympathy for her. This sympathy felt by the audience is generated by the way in which her ex- lover’s denial caused her to leave town and become a worker at a brothel. After this realization, her quest to attain justice seems justified to the audience, except, after more analysis, Claire’s dehumanization and desensitization as a result of the same event make it difficult to continue to have sympathy for her. The fore-mentioned dehumanization and desensitization of the townsmen and Claire Zachanassian enhance the internal questions of the play, and are shown through Claire’s physical loss of human characters, Claire’s loss of values, Claire’s sense of pride, and the townsmen changing their values from refusing to kill III to finding a way to justify why he should be killed.

Claire is the only character whose loss of physical human attributes is emphasized throughout the play. Prior to Claire’s arrival, the townspeople

expect her to be the same Claire who they once knew. Alfred Ill begins to notice changes when he tries to touch her and realizes that she has lost some limbs and now has a prosthetic leg and arm. Curious about the extent to which Claire had lost her obvious physical human characteristics, Ill asks, " Claire are you all artificial?" (Dürrenmatt 31), to which she responds, " practically" (Dürrenmatt 31). This brief interaction is only the beginning of the discovery of Claire's inhumanity. Dürrenmatt introduces her this way, focusing on her imperfections, to subtly hint at the changes which have taken place in her life. This physical dehumanization is accompanied by a tone of arrogance. Her references to herself as " unkillable" (Dürrenmatt 31) are testaments to this arrogance. The loss of her arm and leg seem to contribute to her lack of sympathy and in turn make the audience lose their feelings of concern and despondence towards Claire for having to become a prostitute and giving up her child. One begins to question if Claire's apparent need for justice is necessary as her desires are beyond malicious with her request for Ill's death. It is evident that Claire's physical dehumanization serves as a metaphor for her loss of morals and values.

Claire's loss of morals and values is also seen in her emotional and mental dehumanization. It is understandable for Claire's psyche to be damaged as she had been betrayed by the one she loved. Accordingly, that is exactly what happened to her mindset in terms of her way of viewing things.

Dürrenmatt showed how a tragic event could cause an individual to lose emotions, even those that are known to be innate. The audience learns from Claire that " it lived one year" (Dürrenmatt 38) and that she " only saw the thing once" (Dürrenmatt 87) when she makes mention of her late child. For a

mother to refer to her child, dead or alive, as “ it” or “ the thing” shows an apparent lack of natural sentiments. Furthermore, she does not even show any signs of remorse regarding the passing away of the child. Her cold-heartedness does not end there however. Luckily for Claire, she acquired a vast amount of wealth from her first marriage but, as a result, has become arrogant.

Claire’s egotism is apparent through the things she says throughout the play. When commenting on her desire for justice, she remarks that she “ can afford it” (Dürrenmatt 38). She is so consumed with her riches that she is now of the belief that everything, including justice, can be purchased. This idea defeats the purpose of justice, something which should consist of fairness, as it becomes more of a need for revenge as opposed to need for true justice. By having Claire say that she can afford her justice, Dürrenmatt makes it seem as though she does not fully understand the concept of attaining justice. Claire has yet to realize that even if Ill is killed for ruining her life, she will still bear the pain of the memories his actions left with her. Sadly, Claire is too focused on an unhealthy need for revenge to come to her senses and realize she will always have the memories of and pain from what Ill’s actions did to her. Lastly, when Claire says, “ You only have husbands for display purposes, they shouldn’t be useful,” (Dürrenmatt 86) it becomes most obvious that her insensitivity has no boundaries. Her spouses are merely for show and through the duration of the play, the audience realizes this, considering that she discusses marrying about eight different men. All of the previously mentioned ways in which Claire portrayed her desensitization were Dürrenmatt’s way of showing how flawed humans can

be in their behavior but, what is more is that, these factors also contribute to the audience's disapproval of Claire seeking revenge on Ill.

Besides Claire, the townsmen also exhibit signs of dehumanization. They are motivated by their personal greed, which is fueled by Claire's offer to donate one million dollars for Guellen and its families. The townsmen transition from having good intentions of defending Ill's life to finding a way to justify his murder. The mayor is initially adamant that the town will not accept Claire's offer "in the name of humanity" (Dürrenmatt 35), as he puts it. He later notices the money at stake and how beneficial it could be for the town and its people and thus vindicates considering Claire's proposal by saying it is "not for the sake of money but for the sake of justice" (Dürrenmatt 84). The good intentions of humans can sometimes be tampered with when exterior pressures play a role and the mayor's change from saving Ill to killing him depicts this idea. The mayor is just one example of the many townsmen who also displayed a transition in morals due to greed. Even though the mayor's quote sounds like he wanted justice to be served, it is easily seen that the mayor, along with the other townsmen, were really after Claire's money. The way in which they finally gave into Claire's selfish proposal shows the desensitization which took place amongst the townsmen. This desensitization made Ill's death appear as if it was a sacrifice for Guellen and its citizens to get what they want, instead of a way to right a wrong they once committed.

Although the reader can sympathize with the unfortunate situation which occurred in Claire's life years ago, the dehumanization and desensitization of Claire and the townsmen throughout the play make it difficult to approve of <https://assignbuster.com/the-effect-of-dehumanization-in-the-visit/>

Claire's need for justice. Like previously stated, this loss of human qualities is seen through Claire's physical loss of human characters, loss of values, sense of pride and the townsmen's change in values from refusing to kill Ill to finding a way to justify why he should be killed. After taking an in-depth look into these said events, Claire's need for justice is undermined. Her despicable methods are atrocious and there is nothing fair about the justice she envisions. Dürrenmatt's ability to change the audience's emotions towards Claire and the townsmen, from sentiments of sadness and approval to disgust and disbelief, help him to create an appropriate atmosphere to successfully address dehumanization in *The Visit*.

## **Works Cited**

Dürrenmatt, Friedrich. *The Visit*. Trans. Patrick Bowles. London: Jonathan Cape, 1956. Print.