

Poverty and humanistic values in the visit



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Poverty is one of the most important themes of *The Visit*, and serves as the foundation for the entire plot. If the town of Guellen had not fallen into deep poverty, Claire Zachanassian would have never had to visit the town and present the solution of wealth and prosperity to their problem (although, it is arguable that Guellen would not have fallen into poverty if it weren't for Claire financially corrupting the town, so her motives come into play here). Before Claire, the town of Guellen based their society on humanistic values that they held in the highest regard. These values slowly fade as the citizens of Guellen begin to gain wealth. Poverty serves as a symbol of these humanistic values because of the negative correlation between poverty and humanistic values.

Guellen was obviously an extremely impoverished town. Its citizens were all struggling to get by and everything was closing down and being sold. Poverty was initially the cause of Guellen's problems. Historically, many European economies were not doing well at this point in time due to the recent world wars. It is not obviously stated where *The Visit* took place (most likely Germany or Switzerland), but due to its obvious western European location it is safe to say that due to the historical context, the economy would be struggling. In the first scene, where the setting is exposed, the town's impoverished state is made very clear by the dialogue of the citizens. They discuss the state of the town and things closing down and being sold. It sets the stage for what is to come. It is important to remember that Claire's offer could not have been made (or would not nearly have had the same effect) if the town of Guellen were not impoverished in this way.

In this beginning scene, the citizens discuss the impending visit of a former citizen, the powerful Claire Zachannasian. The second man introduces this with, “ It’s about time the millionairess got here. They say she founded a hospital in Kalberstadt” (page 3).. She arrives and mostly converses with Ill, and it is obvious that they had a relationship in the past. Ill describes their seemingly close, friendly relationship by saying, “ We were the best of friends – young and impetuous – after all, gentlemen, I was a young fellow forty-five years ago- and she, Clara, I can still see her shining through the dark on her way to meet me in Petersen’s barn or walking barefoot on moss and leaves through the woods of Konradsw Weil with her red hair streaming behind her...” (page 6). Durrenmatt uses Ill’s beautiful imagery and memories of Claire to characterize not only Claire but Ill himself as we see their relationship unfold. She eventually arrives and tells the citizens she has an offer for them that will rescue them from poverty. The citizens are all obviously very excited about this, until they learn what the offer entails. Claire makes her offer to save the town from poverty if Ill is killed. “ I will give you a billion, and with that billion I will buy myself justice” (page 31). At this point in the play, the citizens do not accept as they would rather be in poverty than have the blood of a fellow citizen on their hands. The mayor says, “... we are still in Europe; we’re not savages yet. In the name of the town of Guellen I reject your offer. In the name of humanity. We would rather be poor than have blood on our hands” (page 35). This is because of the humanistic values they value so dearly. The implications of poverty then begin to change. The citizens start to realize that they could easily be saved from poverty from this simple offer. When wealth was in reach, poverty began to look much worse. The citizens were given the prospect of wealth

and they soon realized they could not turn this down. Wealth was so close and they wanted it so badly. This is evident when the citizens start buying things on credit, going into Ill's shop and making bigger purchases. Ill knows that these citizens can not usually afford to make purchases on credit, so he is extremely suspicious. When Ill asks about everyone's new yellow shoes, the women say, " We bought them on credit, Mr. Ill," (page 44). At this point their humanistic values started to decline as wealth and the prospect of it started to increase.

This desire for wealth is simply human nature. Why would someone want to live in poverty when they could easily start being wealthy? As the play progresses, the citizens are more and more intrigued by wealth. Ill begins to realize his impending fate. He talks to many of the citizens, and none of them admit that they want to go through with Claire's decision, but it is made very obvious. It is only the teacher, in a drunken stupor, that admits the flawed nature of the decision and proves the decrease of humanistic values in the citizens. He opens up with, " I'm telling it like an archangel, with a ringing voice. For I am a humanist, a friend of the ancient Greeks, an admirer of Plato... sit down. Humanity has to sit down. Absolutely- if even you won't stand up for the truth," (page 81). He warns Ill about the decision, but he does not try to help, because deep down he wants the wealth too.

Ill can not successfully escape his fate. He is killed at the end of the play. The wealth was too tempting for the citizens. Once they had a taste, they could never go back, no matter what it entailed. This leads to the chorus, which basically described what has happened throughout the play and the aftermath. The citizens (chorus) state that poverty is the worst thing in the

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world and the cause of all of their problems. At the beginning of the play, most of the citizens would have most likely not said that poverty is the worst thing in the world. They were already in poverty, and surely they could've had it worse. After all, initially, they didn't accept Claire's offer because they believed that Ill's life was more important. They valued their humanistic values more; they were all they had. Once the offer is introduced, the general opinion on poverty begins to change. It becomes more and more horrible once the citizens realize what they could have. Poverty then becomes a scapegoat of sorts; something to blame for what was really done by the fault of human nature.

The initial humanistic values of the citizens of Gullen probably would not have existed if the town wasn't impoverished. Value of human life is more important when everyone is poor and all they have is each other. As poverty decreases, so do the humanistic values in a positive correlation. Ill's life decreases in value as the citizens realize and start utilizing the wealth they could easily receive. This leads to Ill's obvious death. Poverty was the foundation of the morals of the citizens of Guellen. At surface level, poverty is bad and wealth is good. But, it is likely a poor person would say that poverty is not the worst thing in the world. Durrenmatt uses this story to juxtapose the ideals of the wealthy and poor. Wealthy people are likely to value their wealth. At all costs, they do not want to lose their money, so poverty may seem like a worse option. Impoverished people only have themselves; therefore, the value placed on human life is very high. Poverty is not the cause of the problems in *The Visit*, directly anyway. The problems were caused simply by human nature. Humans will want wealth if it is

available to them. If the town of Gullen wasn't poor originally, they most likely would have still wanted to become wealthier (just probably not quite to the extent they did in the play). Poverty changes the circumstances but the flaw of humanity exists no matter what the socioeconomic status of the town is.

The impoverished citizens of Guellen place a high value on human life, placing great importance on their humanistic values. They are then given an offer to increase their wealth if they kill own of their own. Durrenmatt brilliantly breaks down humanity's desire for wealth as struggling citizens are given an ultimatum. As their prospective wealth increases, they value that wealth and material instead of human life, so humanistic values decrease. Therefore, poverty serves as a symbol of humanistic values due to the negative correlation of the two ideas.