

Institute for Christian Teaching
Education Department of Seventh-day Adventists

**BIBLICAL THEMES IN F. DÜRRENMATT'S TRAGICOMEDIES
(AN ANGEL COMES TO BABYLON. THE VISIT)**

by

Jutta Thiede-Gutknecht

Schulzentrum Marienhöhe, Darmstadt
Germany

548-03 Institute for Christian Teaching
12501 Old Columbia Pike
Silver Spring, MD 20904 USA

Prepared for the
31st International Seminar on the Integration of Faith and Learning
Friedensau Adventist University, Germany
July 13 – 25, 2003

I Introduction

In Western Europe, we cannot assume any longer that young people will sooner or later automatically concern themselves with the issue of religion. More and more children grow up in families of non-believers and they are not taught the stories from the Bible in their childhood. They are not familiar with Biblical names like Abraham or Jonah, and in a recent survey in Germany it was established that more than half of those questioned did not even know why we as Christians celebrate Easter.

At our Adventist schools conditions may not be that bad, because apart from children from Christian families we also get students whose parents appreciate the conveying of Christian values through Christian teachers. Thus, unless the parents have chosen a Christian school against the will of their children, teachers will find a certain degree of *openness* towards Biblical themes, maybe even the *expectation* of discussing these topics in class.

The purpose of this essay is to examine how through literature the Christian teacher can help his students to concern themselves with Christian values. They will be able to discuss them as qualities or missing qualities of some fictional characters before they hopefully think about and reconsider their own personal attitudes and convictions.

Friedrich Dürrenmatt was a Swiss author of the 20th century who took up vital and serious themes in his works, like guilt and death, moral corruption, greed etc., and he did so in a highly entertaining and amusing way that usually catches students' interest and attention. That is the reason why I chose two of his plays, "An Angel Comes to Babylon" (Ein Engel kommt nach Babylon) and "The Visit" (Der Besuch der alten Dame), which both contain a lot of biblical allusions and imagery, to be dealt with in my paper.

II The Author

1. Short Biography Illustrating the Christian Roots of the Author Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Friedrich Dürrenmatt was born in Konolfingen, near Bern, on January 5, 1921. His grandfather was a well-known satirist and political poet who "encouraged in the young boy a questioning spirit which would characterize his later works"¹. Dürrenmatt's father was a Protestant minister. In 1935 the family moved to Bern. Dürrenmatt entered the University of Bern in 1941 and he studied literature and philosophy. He also did a lot of drawing and he preferred to read Greek tragedies, modern literature such as the works of Kafka or those of Kierkegaard and Ernst Jünger.

In 1946 Dürrenmatt married the actress Lotti Geissler; they had one son and two daughters. Dürrenmatt wrote sketches for political cabarets, radio plays, theatre reviews and essays. His first play, "It is written" (Es steht geschrieben), premiered in

¹ <http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc37.html>

Zurich in April 1947. In the sixties Dürrenmatt was a co-director of the Basel Theatre and a co-editor of *Zürcher Sonntags-Journal*.

After the death of his first wife, he got married to Charlotte Kerr in 1984. Dürrenmatt received many awards as well as honorary degrees from five universities. He died of heart failure on December 14, 1990.²

2. Christian Impact on Dürrenmatt in his Childhood

During his childhood in the village of Konolfingen, Dürrenmatt witnessed various forms of piety, such as those of sects (he mentions a dentist who talked about his faith while giving his patients their fillings), camp-meetings or the Salvation Army.³

Dürrenmatt's image of God was rather contradictory when he was a child. In one of his writings he called him a shadowy good Lord who you had to worship and ask for forgiveness, but you could also expect God to give you all the things you hoped and longed for. It was like being in a permanent exam, there were grades for everything. You had no protection against this kind of faith.⁴

Dürrenmatt describes his father as a person who obeyed his faith with a conscious blindness and for whom the idea of nothingness after death was even more frightening than the existence of hell.⁵ Dürrenmatt does not say this was a false or an artificial attitude, because although people's faith restricted their personal freedom, it also meant that they had a secure and reliable position in God's creation.

3. Dissociation from Christianity

When the family moved to Bern in 1935, Dürrenmatt's most far-reaching experience was the loss of his understandable world. It was replaced by a chaotic and impenetrable world which he called a labyrinth. This experience together with the rebellion against his father and the kind of faith that he represented, and also the historic and political developments of that time were the reasons why Dürrenmatt lost his youthful faith and eventually developed a skeptical attitude towards all kinds of ideologies.⁶ There is some evidence that he was very doubtful about all sorts of "isms" and that he called himself a "protestant" in the sense that he protested against each and every power that claimed to be of divine quality, no matter whether church or state, whether party or political leader.⁷

As far as his relationship to God was concerned he held the conviction that there is an infinite abyss between man and God⁸ and that there is no way of communication between the two of them.⁹

² <http://www.kirjasto.sci.difdurren.htm>

³ <http://www.alex-hartmann.net/duerrenmatt/Auto.html>

⁴ F. Dürrenmatt, *Stoffe I*, Zürich: Diogenes (1981) 1984, p. 28f.

⁵ F. Dürrenmatt, *Stoffe II/III*, Zürich: Diogenes (1981) 1984, p. 21f and p. 13.

⁶ Andreas Hapkemeyer, *Höll' und Teufel. Ein Motivkomplex im Werk Friedrich Dürrenmatts*. Innsbruck: Univ., Institut für Germanistik, 1998, p.16f.

⁷ Emil Weber, *Friedrich Dürrenmatt und die Frage nach Gott: Zur theologischen Relevanz der frühen Prosa eines merkwürdigen Protestanten*. Zürich: Theolog. Verlag 1980, p. 40f.

⁸ Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Die Stadt. Prosa I – IV*. Neuausgabe 1961. Zürich, Arche 1952, p. 177.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 184.

4. Dürrenmatt's Earliest Tale

Dürrenmatt wrote one short tale in the year 1942 that probably was his first publication which is accessible today. It is called "Christmas":

"It was Christmas. I walked across the open plain. The snow was like glass. It was cold. The air was dead. No movement, no sound. The horizon was round. The sky was black. The stars had died. The moon had been buried yesterday. The sun hadn't risen. I screamed. I didn't hear me. I screamed again. I saw a body lying on the snow. It was baby Jesus. His limbs white and stiff. The halo a yellow, frozen disk. I took the child in my hands. I moved its arms up and down. I opened its eye-lids. It had no eyes. I was hungry. I ate the halo. It tasted like stale bread. I bit off its head. Old marzipan. I walked away."

I would suggest presenting this story as an adequate introduction to the subject of Dürrenmatt's works. It has to be understood in the historic context of World War II, but above all, this story depicts the hopelessness of the individual after learning that God is dead or after losing his or her traditional faith. Especially for children of ministers this way of dissociating from tradition can be rather traumatic. Dürrenmatt made an effort to cope with his life, which now lacked a transcendent component, but as a matter of fact religious questions and images from the Christian tradition kept forcing themselves as a matter of fact into his writings. The omnipresence of Christian ideas in his works seems to signify that Dürrenmatt doubted the possibility of escaping God's power.¹⁰ The consequence of the declaration of God's death does not seem to be the liberation of man, but the experience of a threatening world.¹¹

5. Dürrenmatt and his Theory of the Comedy

Although Dürrenmatt took up serious issues, he called his plays "comedies" or "tragicomedies". How can serious topics be dealt with in a comedy? Or how can a play be both tragic and comic? Some remarks on Dürrenmatt's theory of drama will help to understand his approach. He wrote: "Tragedy presupposes guilt, despair, moderation, lucidity, vision, a sense of responsibility. In this Punch-and-Judy show of our century, there are neither guilty nor responsible individuals anymore ... We are all collectively guilty, collectively bogged down in the sins of our fathers and of our forefathers. We are the children of our forebears. That is our misfortune, but not our guilt."¹² Dürrenmatt refuses to look at comedy as something dubious or inferior. He stresses the exposing and moral qualities of comedy, because comedy demonstrates ridiculous weaknesses like meanness and hypochondria¹³, corruption and greed.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 155.

¹¹ *ibid.*, p. 160.

¹² <http://www.theatrewesternsprings.com/visit-about.htm>

¹³ Wolfgang Böth, *Vom religiösen Drama zur politischen Komödie: Friedrich Dürrenmatt „Die Wiedertäufer“ und „Es steht geschrieben“; ein Vergleich*. Frankfurt a. M.: Lang, 1979, p. 289.

III “An Angel Comes to Babylon“ (Ein Engel kommt nach Babylon)

The first tragicomedy to be examined in this paper is called “An Angel Comes to Babylon”. I am assuming the students will be 16 or older when they study the text.

1. Summary

In this play, which was published in 1954, an Angel brings, as a gift from Heaven, a girl called Kurrubi who is destined to belong to the lowest member of humanity. However, neither King Nebuchadnezzar, nor any other of the Babylonians, prove willing to sacrifice their material possessions and their status in order to enjoy Heaven’s gift – that privilege is left to the beggar, Akki, who runs off with the girl, while the King, in defiance, builds the Tower of Babel.

2. The Title of the Play

The title already confronts the students with two Biblical terms that they might not be familiar with: “Angel” and “Babylon”. The teacher should provide sufficient information on both.

a) “Angel”

The following references from the Bible contain various aspects of the different tasks and duties that angels carry out in the universe and particularly with regard to human beings on earth:

Ps. 34:7,

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.

Ps. 103:20,

Bless the Lord, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, hearkening to the voice of his word!

Mt. 2:13,

Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.”

Luke 2:13.14,

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!”

1. Peter 3:22,

... who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him.

The students will soon find out that Dürrenmatt’s “Angel” does not have much in common with the biblical understanding of those supernatural beings. As

the emphasis of this essay, however, is on *human* weaknesses and failures, the given hints have to be sufficient for my purposes.

b) “Babylon”

Concerning the term “Babel” or “Babylon” I would suggest combining some rather detailed information from an encyclopedia with the biblical report of the erection of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, 1 – 9 (see Appendix I).

On the first few pages of the play Dürrenmatt already characterizes the setting. He mentions two places and he calls the first one (Heaven) the most important place in the play. About the second one (Earth) he speaks as a viscous and stubborn substance. The introductory stage directions also mention certain posters and written appeals against the habit of begging. So at this early stage the students can be asked to discuss the meaning of those two places and write down their estimation of what the City of Babel stands for.

3. The Characters of the Play

The teacher will have to provide information on those characters whose names are taken from the Bible, such as Nebuchadnezzar or Nimrod. Kurrubi, of course, the girl who was created to be given to the lowest member of humanity, is a character of fiction. However, her name that resembles the term “cherub” seems to suggest that her angelic personality makes her very different from all the rest of humanity.

4. Greed versus Grace

In his plays Dürrenmatt usually pursues several goals. He shoots his arrows at all sorts of authorities and at the human weaknesses that can be detected in them. In my paper, however, I am going to concentrate on the main plot.

Obviously, the dramatic conflict is stirred up by the fact that beautiful Kurrubi is supposed to be given to “the lowest member of humanity”, but falls in love with King Nebuchadnezzar who is disguised as a beggar (which Kurrubi does not know) and who loses a begging competition against Akki, the most cunning of all beggars. This makes Nebuchadnezzar “the lowest member of humanity”, although he is a king. When Nebuchadnezzar sees Kurrubi for the first time, he is completely out of his mind, because he is so impressed with her beauty. Still, he rejects her, for he considers her to be an inappropriate gift for a beggar. Nebuchadnezzar cannot understand that “Heaven” does not allow her to become his (the king’s) wife, which in his opinion would be a lot more suitable for Kurrubi and would also end Nebuchadnezzar’s loneliness. He still does not reveal himself as the king, but treats Kurrubi in the most humiliating way just to convince Heaven that it was the wrong decision to give Kurrubi to him (the beggar). But Kurrubi loves him all the same.

It is Akki again who takes care of Kurrubi while all the men from Babylon have fallen in love with her and start writing poems because they claim that the beautiful girl has given their lives a deeper meaning.

After a while the Babylonians want to make Kurrubi their queen. Nebuchadnezzar’s attitude, however, is still the same, so he asks his head theologian for advice. The theologian explains that the angel may have made a mistake, but Heaven is never

wrong. That encourages Nebuchadnezzar to change his mind, and he is ready to place his kingdom at Kurrubi's feet. Kurrubi, however, still loves "her beggar" and presumes that he is now disguised as a king. She is confused because Nebuchadnezzar is not clear about what he actually is: King or beggar, powerful or powerless, rich or poor.

What she sees very distinctly is the fact that Nebuchadnezzar is not going to leave his throne for fear of losing it. In fact he is ready to hand her over to the person who loves her most. All the men shout and scream, "Me, please!" But just as Nebuchadnezzar was not prepared to give up his throne, none of them is willing to become a beggar.

Once again it is Akki who takes care of Kurrubi while Nebuchadnezzar tells his soldiers to take all the Babylonians prisoners, and he starts to build the Tower of Babel to take revenge for the shame that Heaven has brought upon him.

5. Some Weaknesses in the Structure of the Play

The play has got its weak spots. Firstly, Dürrenmatt claims that he wrote it in order to explain why the Tower of Babel was built. In fact, the Tower is not even mentioned until the very end of the play, and its erection is not necessarily the logical result of the plot.

Secondly, the plot is overloaded with ideas ("Einfälle"), so that many mental obstacles have to be overcome on the way to the final explanation why Nebuchadnezzar built the Tower of Babel. As reasons the author mentions a lack of will power, the inability of people to confine themselves to the essentials and finally their inability to live their lives without hubris.¹⁴

6. Kurrubi – the Embodiment of Grace

To be able to look at those reasons more closely, it is necessary for the class to agree on the role of Kurrubi: After the beggars' competition she is offered to Nebuchadnezzar as something incredible and unique: the grace and mercy of Heaven.

In the German language there is one word ("Gnade") that covers both English terms, "grace" as well as "mercy". As Kurrubi is explicitly introduced as the embodiment of God's grace it will be worthwhile to compare the everyday usage of that term with the Biblical usage. I would suggest choosing examples from the Old and the New Testament, such as

Deut. 4:31,

for the Lord your God is a merciful God; he will not fail you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers which he swore to them,

¹⁴ Edgar Neis (ed.), *Erläuterungen zu Friedrich Dürrenmatt "Romulus der Große", "Ein Engel kommt nach Babylon", "Der Meteor", Königs Erläuterungen und Materialien, Vol. 211. C. Bange Verlag – Hollfeld, 1998, p. 76f.*

Acts 15:11,

But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will,

Rom. 1:7,

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ,

Rom. 3:24,

They are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus.

Presenting the students with these texts will hopefully lead to a satisfactory explanation of "grace" in the Biblical sense and maybe even to a fruitful discussion. In "Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible" the term "mercy" is defined as "the compassionate disposition to forgive someone or to offer aid, assistance or help to someone in need"¹⁵. The term "grace" is defined as "God's disposition to show favor toward humans, and God's continuing loyalty toward those accepted into divine favor. This favor manifested itself in acts of deliverance in time of need and provision of daily sustenance."¹⁶

The discussion of the Biblical understanding of "grace" will naturally lead to the question: Who or what makes people reject such a unique and generous gift from Heaven?

7. Rejection of Grace

When Kurrubi is first given to Nebuchadnezzar after he has lost the competition, he is very upset because from his point of view Heaven gives away presents in a very thoughtless manner and does not meet people's needs at all: He complains that the poor go hungry, so Heaven should send them bread instead of grace. By contrast, the most powerful person – the King – has plenty of food, but he is lonely. So Heaven should give Nebuchadnezzar a companion, because he desperately needs a person to keep his company.

Nebuchadnezzar makes Kurrubi suffer for the failures of Heaven by beating and kicking her.

8. Man's Justice versus God's Injustice?

In this context students are confronted with the question of justice, because although Nebuchadnezzar deliberately mistreats Kurrubi, his complaint might evoke the students' sympathy for him. Especially in his final speech Nebuchadnezzar expresses his utter sadness, because he feels that Heaven has not appreciated his attempts to make the world a better place, to abolish poverty and to introduce reason and common sense.

¹⁵ David Noel Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K., p. 885.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 524.

On the other hand, Nebuchadnezzar accuses himself and his subjects of betraying Kurrubi, because they were unwilling to give up their material belongings and their positions, just as he, the King, was not prepared to give up his throne. Nebuchadnezzar announces that he is going to build a tower which will pass through infinity in order to attack his enemy: He wants to prove that his justice is worth more than God's injustice.

9. The Last will be First ...

The play ends with Akki and Kurrubi fleeing into the desert. Akki is the only person who does not care about personal belongings, although he has accumulated a lot of riches by begging. They enable him to take care of other people such as a whole crowd of poor poets. Akki is aware of the fact that he is very fortunate to receive the heavenly grace for the second time, according to another word from the Bible (Mt. 20:16): "So the last will be first, and the first last." He has good reason to face his future life with enthusiasm and energy.

IV "The Visit" (Der Besuch der alten Dame)

The second tragicomedy I would like to present is called "The Visit", and again I am assuming the students studying the play will be 16 or older.

1. Summary

This play, which is probably Dürrenmatt's most famous work, was first published in 1956¹⁷. It is set in Gullen, a little town on the verge of decay. Its name resembles a German word for "excrement". Most citizens of Gullen are unemployed, but they are expecting an immensely rich visitor: Claire Zachanassian, a billionaire who was born in Gullen and who once had a secret affair with Alfred III, now the manager of the general store. The Gulleners appoint Alfred III to charm his former sweetheart to invest in their town. They don't know that Claire "has spent her life in a single-minded vengeance"¹⁸ since she was left abandoned and pregnant by III who betrayed her in a paternity suit. In return for an overwhelming amount of money that Claire is prepared to give the little town, she demands the life of Alfred III, her former lover. The first reaction of the loyal Gulleners is a deadly silence and then a clear rejection of Claire's offer. "I'll wait", Claire says quietly, and the rest of the play deals with the people's conflict between greed and loyalty, as well as with the ideas of justice, guilt and responsibility. In the end, III is the only one who is prepared to carry his part of the burden.

2. The Characters of the Play

The play has two major characters, Claire Zachanassian and Alfred III. Besides them, there are the citizens of Gullen, representing various institutions of society (family,

¹⁷ Dürrenmatt was always working and reworking his writing, even years after publishing it. He called this 'reeducating' his work. He said, "The stage is always the author's teacher" (<http://www.moveweb.com/Guidewrite/durrenmatt.html>).

¹⁸<http://www.moveweb.com/Guidewrite/durrenmatt.html>

church, police), and a collection of servants and consecutive husbands around Claire. Most of the over thirty characters in the play are “one-note cardboard cutouts, needed to fill out a satiric structure”.¹⁹

For the purpose of this paper I will concentrate on Claire Zachanassian and Alfred III, with the main focus on III's development as he gradually takes responsibility for his wrongdoing. To a certain extent, his experience even resembles the Passion of Jesus Christ.

a) Claire Zachanassian

Claire is 62 when she visits her hometown for the first time after 45 years. She has been a billionaire since her first husband, the world's richest man, died. She has always been determined to punish those who made her suffer. For example, she pursued the two men who had lied about her in court all over the world. When she had found them, both of them were castrated, blinded and made her slaves.²⁰ Their names, Koby and Loby, stand for their lack of individualism and loss of identity. – Claire is the incarnation of cynicism and has lost any self-respect whatsoever. When she and Alfred visit the places where they used to meet as lovers, Claire soon destroys any nostalgic feelings with brutal frankness when she shocks her former sweetheart by mentioning her wooden leg and her ivory hand.

Relationships don't seem to mean anything to her. After six marriages and nearly as many divorces Claire goes through three husbands in the course of the play.

Her language is rough and curt. Therefore it is necessary not to overlook the few incidents of self-revelation, e.g. at the end of Act I when she mentions her baby child that only lived for one year. Another evidence of Claire's personal grief is given at the beginning of Act III when she describes how she was thrown out of Gullen in the winter of 1910, heavily pregnant, with the citizens of Gullen grinning at her departure without any pity.

The tragic aspect of Claire's grotesque personality only becomes visible when we see her as the victim of III's betrayal and when we understand how dramatically the loss of her love changed her life.

b) Alfred III

When Claire returns to Gullen, Alfred III is 65 years old, married, with two grown up children, and the manager of the local general store. III is one of the most popular citizens of Gullen, as the Mayor points out in Act I, and also the current mayoral candidate.

Although III had a love affair with Claire 45 years ago, he married Mathilde Blumhardt, the owner of the grocer's shop, and sent Claire away who was only 17 years old and pregnant. It was III who bribed Koby and Loby to testify that they had slept with Claire.

¹⁹ <http://www.stthomasu.ca/~hunt/reviews/visit.htm>

²⁰ <http://www.moveweb.com/Guidewrite/durrenmatt.html>

When after all these years Ill is confronted with the story of Claire's past for the first time, he shows no admission of guilt. He even claims that he sent Claire away for her own good, because he did not want to ruin her future. From his point of view this crazy story is just water under the bridge.

3. Justice and Order Purchased at a High Price

Before depicting the parallels between Ill's development and the Passion of Jesus Christ it seems necessary to go back to the character of Claire Zachanassian in order to decide what kind of role she plays when she comes back with a huge sum of money, determined to "purchase justice" after 45 years.

The Teacher in the play, a well-educated representative of humanistic values, compares Claire with an ancient Greek heroine, Medea. Medea was in love with Jason, but when he rejected her she killed their sons. – The Teacher appeals to Claire to act in a humanistic way and not to force the citizens of Gullen to do something horrible, but Claire's cynical reply is, "Feeling for humanity, gentlemen, is cut for the purse of an ordinary millionaire; with financial resources like mine you can afford a new world order" (beginning of Act III).

Jenny C. Hortenbach sees in Claire the characteristics of the almighty God of the Old Testament, judging and demanding a sacrifice as a sign of repentance.²¹ In fact, Claire's claim to be able to create a new world order makes her appear god-like.

With her lurking on the balcony, however, observing the gradual changes in town, and her strategy just to wait patiently until things have sorted themselves out, Claire Zachanassian reminds me much more of the devil who tempted Jesus after he had fasted in the wilderness forty days and forty nights. - After many years of poverty and decay it would be an enormous temptation for anyone to be offered a whole Billion, 500 Million for the town, and 500 Million to share amongst all the citizens. Dürrenmatt himself wrote: "It is a community which slowly yields to temptation ... yet this yielding must be understandable. The temptation is too great, the poverty is too bitter."²²

To pursue the idea of temptation that the citizens of Gullen have to go through it will certainly be worthwhile introducing the short passage from Mt. 4, 1 – 11 that tells us the complete series of temptations that Jesus had to face: starting with Satan's suggestion to turn stones into bread, then to jump down from the pinnacle of the temple and finally to receive "all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them" (v. 8) if Jesus fell down and worshipped the devil.

The third and final stage would probably offer most parallels to Claire's generous gift, but the students should be allowed to come to their own personal results.

²¹ Jenny C. Hortenbach, Biblical Echoes in Dürrenmatt's 'Alte Dame'. *Monatshefte* 57 (1965), p. 145-161.

²² <http://www.moveweb.com/Guidewrite/durrenmatt.html>

4. Greed versus Loyalty

Although Dürrenmatt tries to promote understanding for the Gülleners' yielding to the temptation of wealth, I decided to use the strong term "greed" in order to show the cruelty of the increasing contrast between people's words and their deeds.

When Claire Zachanassian states her demand for the first time, the Mayor replies with dignity that in the name of humanity he rejects her offer, because the citizens of Gullen would rather stay poor than blood-stained (end of Act I).

As soon as the next day begins and Ill has opened his shop, customers come and buy their groceries – but they now choose a better quality than they usually do. They even buy luxuries like chocolate which they will never be able to pay for, unless ... At the same time they keep reassuring Ill that they will always be right behind him – "dead sure" ("todsicher" in German).

Then Ill discovers that everyone is wearing new yellow shoes, purchased on credit. The terrible truth dawns on him, and full of fear he runs to the Policeman and demands that he arrests Claire. But even the Policeman is wearing new yellow shoes. While he is loading his rifle he tries to persuade Ill that not a single person threatens him.

The Mayor is the first one to admit that his point of view has slightly changed. He explains that although they will all of course reject the old lady's proposal, they do not approve of the crime (i.e. Ill's crime) that originally led to the proposal.

The Minister advises Ill to explore his conscience and to repent, because his eternal life is endangered. How little the Minister can help Ill, becomes clear when a new second bell begins to ring from the church tower. The Minister admits his own weakness and urges Ill to flee and not to lead them into temptation.

5. Ill's Guilt and the Way of his "Passion"

There is no doubt that Alfred Ill deserted and betrayed Claire when both of them were young. If this is considered to be the "initial sin", the question arises how it can be atoned.

To discuss the topics of repentance and atonement I would suggest giving the students the task of collecting information on the ways different religions deal with these topics. The teacher should be able to provide information on the Jewish and Christian approach, e.g. with the help of an encyclopaedia.

In "Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible" the term "atonement" is explained as

reconciliation between estranged parties, bringing them into agreement. The focus is the universal problem of sin, which humankind is unable to solve, and which disrupted the perfect harmony between God and creation, causing separation (Isa. 59:2) and death (Rom. 5:12; 6:23). Atonement, therefore, is God's way of bridging the gap and giving life... . Atonement is described in the Hebrew cultus as sacrifice, substitution, mediation, and judgment. ... atonement necessitated the death of a victim. ... The sacrificial blood

represents a life that was given in place of or on behalf of, the penitent one who presented the offering to God. The blood of the animal substituted for the sinner's blood (i.e., life). ... the OT metaphors meet their inexorable fulfillment in Christ. The Cross presents Christ putting "away sin by sacrifice of himself" (Heb. 9:26; cf. v. 22). ... The book of Hebrews highlights Christ's perfect sacrifice for sin and espouses the superiority of his blood over animal blood (Heb. 9:13-14). This was the ideal, complete, all-encompassing sacrifice, accomplishing what the OT sacrifices could not, "one sacrifice for sins for all time" (Heb. 10:12).²³

Act II of "The Visit" finishes with Ill's decision NOT to escape from Gullen and with his desperate realization "I am lost!" The beginning of Act III shows that in Ill's shop considerable renovations have been completed and that his children wear new clothes. When Ill himself enters the shop, he appears to be a changed personality: He is no longer upset and fearful, but very quiet, and he even tells the Teacher to be silent, who is about to accuse Ill's family for betraying Ill.

When only Ill and the Teacher are left in the shop, Ill says that he has given up fighting. He confesses that he has no right to fight because it is his fault that Claire has become what she is now. He can neither help himself nor the Gulleners any longer. His words remind us of the mockery of the chief priests and the scribes when they passed Jesus on the cross and said, "He saved others, he cannot save himself" (Mt. 27, 42).

Jenny C. Hortenbach explains that Ill experiences his own personal "Gethsemane" and "becomes a new human being, who is willing to atone for his former guilt and who is capable of removing Gullen's guilt and punishment by sacrificing his life."²⁴ Not the Mayor nor anyone else can force Ill to come to such a decision. It was a voluntary act of his own free will, just as Jesus came voluntarily "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10, 45).

When the citizens of Gullen finally come together to decide whether they are going to accept Claire's gift, reporters and cameramen are present and the Teacher holds a speech that – interestingly enough – anticipates Claire's own interpretation of the forthcoming decision: By accepting the money she offers them, the Gulleners will confess that they once tolerated injustice, but that from now on they intend to be just and fair and live according to the humanistic values of the Western world. In the ocean of grandiose phrases nobody mentions the price being paid for the town's renewed prosperity: Ill's death. So once again Ill's loneliness and burden becomes audible in his outcry: "My God!", a parallel to Christ's words after the three hours of darkness on the day of his crucifixion: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt. 27, 46).

In contrast to Alfred Ill none of the other citizens of Gullen are willing to accept their share of guilt. "As Peppard writes, 'In the closing scene, the townspeople appear as much slaves as they did at the beginning; if at first they were victims of poverty, they are now the captives of prosperity. Only Ill has found freedom, and he has attained it

²³ David Noel Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K., p. 127f.

²⁴ Jenny C. Hortenbach, Biblical Echoes in Dürrenmatt's 'Alte Dame'. *Monatshefte* 57 (1965), p. 145-161.

only by a withdrawal from the community into death'.²⁵ Therefore one final text from the New Testament may help to raise a discussion about the meaning or the meaninglessness of Ill's death: "But one of them, Ca'iaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, 'You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish" (John 11, 49.50).

Dürrenmatt writes that Ill's death is "meaningful and meaningless at the same time".²⁶ When discussing the question whether Alfred Ill, like Jesus Christ, assumes the role of a redeemer for the citizens of Gullen, the Teacher's remark should not be forgotten that the area around Gullen is full of natural resources, so that the impoverishment of the town must be seen as a deliberate act of revenge executed by Claire Zachanassian. An appropriate investment into the economy of the area would have solved all the problems without anyone having to sacrifice his life.

A practical suggestion concerning this particular chapter would be not to discuss the parallels between Jesus' and Ill's passion in class without leaving enough time to read through the various passages from the Bible beforehand. As the texts are taken from different books of the Bible, most students will find it difficult to recognize the original contexts, when reading them in class.

6. Dürrenmatt's Concept of the "Courageous Character"

As we have seen, Dürrenmatt claims that pure tragedy is not possible any longer, but comedy alone is suitable for us, because in the modern world individuals are no longer in control of their own lives. He admits, however, that "the tragic" is still possible if it is produced out of comedy "as a frightening moment, as an abyss that opens suddenly ..."²⁷

Dürrenmatt believes that there are two possible answers to the "ruinous enigma"²⁸ of this world: a) despair or b) the opposite of despair, e.g. the decision to reconcile oneself with this world. Reconciling oneself does not necessarily mean fighting. If the opponent is too powerful the decision may even be escaping. In this sense Dürrenmatt allows his readers to see that there are still courageous characters.

One of their representatives is Alfred Ill. He used to be a superficial and thoughtless character when he jilted his lover Claire years ago. He expected that somehow dust would settle on the whole matter, but after 45 years of living a rather meaningless life he has to face the consequences of his crime. Struggling with fear and terror, he "takes responsibility for his crime. He achieves the serenity and acceptance that Dürrenmatt saw as the pinnacle of human heroism. He gains stature in our eyes through this transformation. He can reject the city's offer to commit suicide; the town, too, must be made to face its responsibility."²⁹

²⁵ <http://www.moveweb.com/Guidewrite/durrenmatt.html>

²⁶ F. Dürrenmatt, *Komödien I*. Zürich: Arche, 1957, p. 358.

²⁷ F. Dürrenmatt, *Problem of the Theatre*. In: Schmidt, Karl (ed.). Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Der Besuch der alten Dame*. Erläuterungen und Dokumente. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1975, p. 52.

²⁸ <http://www.masquerade.freesevers.com/reviews/rompress.html>

²⁹ <http://www.moveweb.com/Guidewrite/durrenmatt.html>

7. The Historical Context of the Play

Both of the plays that are dealt with in this essay premiered in the fifties of the 20th century. Although Dürrenmatt refuses to see Claire Zachanassian as a representative of the Marshall Plan or of the apocalypse connected with the growing Cold War³⁰, you can hardly avoid drawing a parallel between the plot of "The Visit" and the corruption caused by material goods that became socially acceptable in the society of the "economic miracle" and has blossomed in the most devastating way until today.

Fifty years ago "the question of how a man can hold on to his ideals in the face of grinding poverty was still a strong one".³¹ Nowadays ideals seem to have gone out of fashion altogether. When I discussed "A Man for All Seasons" by Robert Bolt with my advanced English course, the 18-19-year-old students expressed some admiration for More's steadfastness, but at the same time they left no doubt that they did not consider his attitude as up to date. The gap of five centuries was far too wide for them to even think of applying an "old-fashioned attitude" to the reality of the 21st century.

V Conclusion

One of the most important questions that arise after reading and discussing Dürrenmatt's plays is whether the world view that he expresses is totally pessimistic or whether the students were able to spot glimpses of light and hope behind or beyond all the darkness.

Among literary critics the prevailing assessment of Dürrenmatt is that he depicts a "chaotic universe, where God has retreated beyond the stars and where blind chance is the real prime mover, justice is corruptible, ideologies useless, and tragedy no longer possible".³² In my opinion, one of the keys to understanding Dürrenmatt's view is his omnipresent idea of "the courageous character". In all his works there is at least one character who encourages us to stand up for our ideals: Akki, Alfred III, Möbius ("The Physicist") etc. None of them is flawless, all of them are far from being perfect, and that is why they can serve as models, because they do not seem to be that different from us.

Another key is Dürrenmatt's humour. Comedy does not only *demonstrate* weaknesses; in fact, it is the first step to *overcome* them, because laughter creates the necessary distance to gain a critical point of view and to finally correct the mistake.

There is no doubt that Dürrenmatt employs extreme cases in his plays in order to wake us up and to point out that we have to make some basic decisions in our lives. Most of us will never have to decide whether they would prefer to be a king or a beggar, but maybe they will have to make up their minds whether to pursue a promising career or to put up with a lower salary, because a loved one needs their attention and care.

³⁰ *ibid.*

³¹ *ibid.*

³² <http://www.sc.edu/uscpres/Sp98/3213.html>

Most of us will not become rich at the expense of somebody else's death, but how about mobbing, bribery or prostitution as acceptable means to climb the ladder of success?

In his essay, entitled "About Tolerance", Dürrenmatt mentions that as the son of a minister he was shaped by a natural aversion against anything theological. His way of thinking, however, cannot deny its religious origin.³³

Dürrenmatt's plays offer a whole range of opportunities to talk about Christian beliefs and values in the classroom. If the Christian teacher can help his/her students gain insights into their personal ambitions and goals, the joy of studying literature in the classroom will be enriched by a noble purpose.

³³ Andreas Hapkemeyer, *Höll' und Teufel. Ein Motivkomplex im Werk Friedrich Dürrenmatts*. Innsbruck: Univ., Institut für Germanistik, 1998, p. 161.

VI Bibliography

The Bible. Revised Standard Version

Böth, Wolfgang. Vom religiösen Drama zur politischen Komödie: Friedrich Dürrenmatt „Die Wiedertäufer“ und „Es steht geschrieben“; ein Vergleich. Frankfurt/Main u.a.: Lang, 1979.

Dürrenmatt, Friedrich. Die Stadt. Prosa I-IV. Zürich: Arche, (1952) 1961.

Dürrenmatt, Friedrich. Der Besuch der alten Dame. Zürich: Diogenes, 1985.

Dürrenmatt, Friedrich. Ein Engel kommt nach Babylon. Zürich: Diogenes, 1998.

Dürrenmatt, Friedrich. Komödien I. Zürich: Arche, 1957.

Dürrenmatt, Friedrich. Stoffe I-III. Zürich: Diogenes, (1981) 1984.

Freedman, David Noel (ed.). Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible. Grand Rapids, Michigan / Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

Hapkemeyer, Andreas. Höll' und Teufel: ein Motivkomplex im Werk Friedrich Dürrenmatts. Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Kulturwissenschaft. Innsbruck: Institut für Germanistik an der Universität Innsbruck, 1997.

Hartmann, Alexander. Friedrich Dürrenmatt. <http://www.alex-hartmann.net/duerenmatt/Auto.html>

Hortenbach, Jenny C. Biblical Echoes in Dürrenmatt's 'Alte Dame'. Monatshefte 57 (1965).

<http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clsc37.html>

<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/dueren.htm>

<http://www.masquerade.freesevers.com/reviews/rompress.html>

<http://www.moveweb.com/Guidewrite/duerenmatt.html>

<http://www.sc.edu/uscpres/Sp98/3213.html>

<http://stthomasu.ca/~hunt/reviews/visit.htm>

<http://theatrewesternsprings.com/visit-about.htm>

Immig, Rudolf. Gnade – oder die Liebe zum Unvollkommenen: die Leistung der Schuld und das Ereignis der Gnade in den Komödien Friedrich Dürrenmatts. Stuttgart, 1974.

Mayer, Sigrid (ed.). Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Der Besuch der alten Dame. Grundlagen und Gedanken zum Verständnis des Dramas. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, München: Diesterweg, 1986.

Neis, Edgar. Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Romulus der Große, Ein Engel kommt nach Babylon, Der Meteor. Königs Erläuterungen und Materialien. Hollfeld: Bange, 1998.

Schmidt, Karl (ed.). Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Der Besuch der alten Dame. Erläuterungen und Dokumente. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1975.

Staubli, Thomas. Abschied vom Turmmythos. <http://www.autobahnkirche.de/info-container/bibel/bibel-aktuell/babel-mythos-kba.html>

Van Rinsum, Annemarie & Wolfgang. Interpretationen Dramen. München: Bayerischer Schulbuchverlag, 1983.

Weber, Emil. Friedrich Dürrenmatt und die Frage nach Gott: Zur theologischen Relevanz der frühen Prosa eines merkwürdigen Protestanten. Zürich: Theolog. Verlag, 1980.

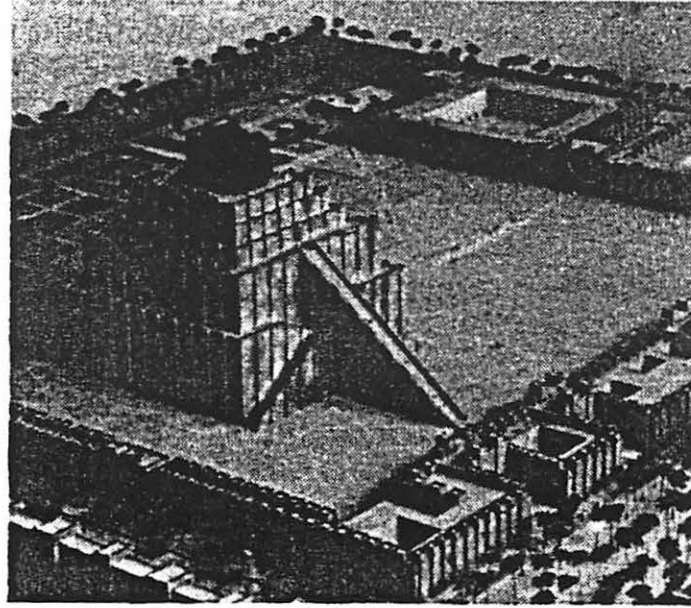
Babylon, babylonisch **Babilu**, hebr. **Babel**, Ruinenstadt im N des unteren Mesopotamien, beiderseits des Euphrat; erstmals gegen Ende des 3. Jahrtsd. v. Chr. erwähnt.

Als Residenz Hammurapis (um 1700 v. Chr.) entwickelte sich B. zum polit. und kulturellen Zentrum Vorderasiens und blieb es auch unter der Herrschaft der Kassiten (seit 1530 v. Chr.). Seit 1250 fiel B. mehrfach in assyr. Hand (Zerstörung durch Sanherib 689 v. Chr.). Die größte Blüte erlebte es unter Nabopolassar (626 bis 605) und Nebukadnezar II. (605–562). Seit etwa 550 v. Chr. eine der drei Hauptstädte des Perserreichs, von Alexander d. Gr. als Hauptstadt seines Weltreichs vorgesehen (Eroberung 331 v. Chr.), verfiel es unter den Seleukiden, die Seleukia als Residenz gründeten.

Da die Stadt Hammurapis unter dem heutigen Grundwasserspiegel liegt, konnte sie nicht ausgegraben werden. Freigelegt wurde seit 1899 von der Dt. Orientges. die Neubabylon. Stadt Nebukadnezars II. mit Resten des Tempelbezirks des Marduk mit Tempelturm (→ Babylonischer Turm), des Ischtartempels, der Hauptburg, der Südburg mit Thronsaal und Hängenden Gärten und des Sommerpalastes. Die Stadt war von einer Mauer mit 8 Toren umgeben, das berühmteste war das Ischtartor.

Der Name B. war im Judentum und N. T. die religiöse Verhüllung des Namens Rom, bes. in der Geheimen Offenbarung in Anlehnung an die Propheten des A. T. (ihnen war B. als Typ der gottfeindl. Stadt erschienen) die Große Stadt, Mutter aller Greuel.

Babylonischer Turm, Stufentempel in Babylon. Nach 1. Mos. 11 sollte er bis in den Himmel reichen; seine Vollendung wurde durch die babylonische Sprachverwirrung verhindert. Der B. T. hatte eine quadrat. Grundfläche von 91,5 m Seitenlänge. Die Rekonstruktionen nehmen eine Höhe von etwa 90 m an, 3 Treppen im S und einen kleinen Tempel, der die letzten Stufen bildete. Der von Nebukadnezar II. gebaute B. T. hatte vermutlich einen Vorgänger, der unter der 1. Dynastie von Babylon (18.–16. Jh. v. Chr.) entstanden war.



Babylonischer Turm, um 600 v. Chr. (Rekonstruktionsmodell; Berlin, Staatl. Mus.)

Babylonisches Exil, Babylonische Gefangenschaft, 1) der Aufenthalt der Juden in Babylonien nach der Zerstörung Jerusalems und der Deportation der Könige Jojachin (597 v. Chr.) und Zedekia (586 v. Chr.) durch Nebukadnezar II. bis zur von Kyros II. d. Gr. erlaubten Rückkehr (538 v. Chr.).

DER TURM ZU BABEL

11 Es hatte aber alle Welt einerlei Sprache und einerlei Worte. 2 Als sie nun im Osten aufbrachen, fanden sie eine Ebene im Lande Sinear, und sie liessen sich dort nieder. 3 Und sie sprachen untereinander: Wohlan, lasst uns Ziegel streichen und hart brennen! Und es diene ihnen der Ziegel als Stein, und der Asphalt diene ihnen als Mörtel. 4 Und sie sprachen: Wohlan, lasst uns eine Stadt bauen und einen Turm, dessen Spitze bis in den Himmel reicht; so wollen wir uns ein Denkmal schaffen, damit wir uns nicht über die ganze Erde zerstreuen. 5 Da fuhr der Herr hernieder, um die Stadt zu besuchen und den Turm, den die Menschenkinder gebaut hatten. 6 Und der Herr sprach: Siehe, sie sind ein Volk und haben alle eine Sprache. 7 Und dies ist erst der Anfang ihres Tuns; nunmehr wird ihnen nichts unmöglich sein, was immer sie sich vornehmen. 8 Wohlan, lasst uns hinabfahren und daselbst ihre Sprache verwirren, dass keiner mehr des andern Sprache verstehe. 9 Also zerstreute sie der Herr von dort über die ganze Erde, und sie liessen ab, die Stadt zu bauen. 10 Daher heisst ihr Name Babel¹⁾, weil der Herr daselbst die Sprache aller Welt verwirrt und sie von dort über die ganze Erde zerstreut hat.