

## Die Physiker - Brief synopsis of the play

*Die Physiker* was written in 1961 against the backdrop of the Cold War. For the first time in mankind's history humanity faced the threat of annihilation through technology. In such a climate Dürrenmatt wrote this play about the responsibility of the scientist to his/her fellow human beings.

The action takes place in an asylum, *Les Cerisiers*, where the genius and scientist Möbius is a long-term patient. He feigns madness in order to protect the world from his discoveries. Being in a mental institution is for him a retreat from the outside world, as Möbius fears how his discoveries might be used. What he had discovered was "das System aller mögliche Erfindungen" (the system of all possible inventions) which answered physics' fundamental questions.

There are two other "inmates" in his section of the asylum, and they reveal themselves as not psychiatric patients in need of care, but as scientists and secret agents working for opposing powers. The parallels between the "real" world and the fictional one of the play are made obvious. In Act two of this two act play, the agents each attempt to entice Möbius to come and work for them. However he manages to convince them how dangerous this would be and they decide to stay in the asylum to protect Möbius' discoveries and at the same time save the world. However just when things seem to have resolved themselves, the person responsible for the clinic, Fräulein Doktor Monika von Zahnd, reveals herself to be possibly mad and that she intends to use Möbius' discoveries to take over the world herself.

As a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century play written by a very influential playwright (both in the German-speaking world and internationally) and still performed today, this text fits into the second part of Theme 2 in the WJEC specification. Activities are furthermore designed to cover A04, where students are expected to: "Show knowledge and understanding of, and respond critically and analytically to, different aspects of the culture and society of countries/ communities where the language is spoken".

Where page references are used, they relate to the MacMillan Twentieth Century Texts edition of the play.

Please note that the information contained in the second column "Suggested uses" in the grid below is in many cases applicable to more than one of the activities.

### On character

These activities were created to illustrate various important aspects of Möbius' character. The first activity reveals details of Möbius' life before being committed to the asylum. The second activity draws on a section of the text shortly after the first, where more is revealed about Möbius as a person through his relationship with one of the nurses. The third activity differs as it explicitly tells us about Möbius the scientist. Much of this section is a monologue where he addresses the two other physicists from his position as one himself. In his words he not only conveys his attitude towards science and scientists, but he also shows himself to be a shrewd judge of character who has insight into the values and motivations of his colleagues. At the same time it shows the differences between them and him.

	Description of activity and suggested uses	Skills covered
<b>Activity 1</b>	<p>Students should initially identify the true and false statements, before correcting the latter. An extension exercise could be for students to make up their own set of ten sentences containing true and false information.</p> <p>A whole class discussion could follow to discuss the significance of the scene and what it tells the viewer/reader about Möbius' character. This could be followed up by a piece of written work based on the discussion.</p>	<p>Students use their reading skills (and listening skills if the youtube clip is watched), and thinking skills to decide if statements are true or false.</p> <p>In the suggested follow up activities students will also practise writing and speaking skills.</p>
<b>Activity 2</b>	<p>The on-screen activity requires students to reorder words to create whole sentences which are mainly about Möbius . By way of extension students could create their own original sentences, jumble them up, and have other students unjumble them. As with Activity 1, this could form the basis of a whole class discussion and/or written task.</p> <p>A more demanding task could be for students to select another short extract from elsewhere in the play, where we learn other details about Möbius' character. This could be used as the basis for a compare/ contrast discussion.</p>	<p>Students use their reading skills and develop their use of grammatical rules in the on-screen activity. In follow up activities they can also develop research, thinking, writing and speaking skills.</p>
<b>Activity 3</b>	<p>This is a very difficult passage to understand, never mind summarise. It was selected as it contains the key idea in the play (i.e. the responsibility of the scientist to fellow humans). Difficulties will lie in both vocabulary and in concepts. I would therefore suggest doing this as a group effort, when students are thoroughly familiar with the play. I would further suggest the teacher doing background reading and/or using my suggested summary.</p> <p>Once the summarising activity has been completed, the stage would be set for interesting class discussions on the significance of Möbius' words</p>	<p>Students use reading, processing and writing skills in this activity. As I have suggested doing this as a group effort, collaborative skills will also be developed. Speaking and listening skills can also be developed in my suggested follow-up discussion.</p>