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Dürrenmatt's Juxtaposition of Moral Codes in *The Visit*

In 1956, Friedrich Dürrenmatt's iconic tragicomedy *The Visit* was first produced on the stage and its grotesque themes shocked audiences. Dürrenmatt's interpretation of Theatre of the Absurd challenges preconceived ideas of morality and immorality with the intention of invoking change. In this play, each character and the audience must question their sense of justice and their morals. *The Visit* follows Claire Zachanassian, now an old woman, who returns to her poverty-stricken hometown of Gullen to buy herself justice: a million dollars if someone kills Alfred Ill. Immediately, the town rejects Claire's offer, but Claire ominously states: "I'll wait" (*The Visit*, 39). Her malevolent plan unfolds: the townspeople accumulate a large amount of debt as if anticipating receiving a large sum of money. And with the increase in debt, the need to kill Alfred also increases. Despite their business proposition and appeals to humanity, the Doctor and the Schoolmaster are unable to persuade Claire to stop her monstrous crusade. With the media present, the town formally accepts Claire's proposal – they unanimously agree to kill Alfred. At the play's close, Claire hands a check to the Mayor and leaves with a coffin. Monetary temptation transformed the inhabitants of Gullen from sweet, homely people to murderers. They are transformed so much that they even become convinced that their murder is justified on many levels. Did their morality become corrupted or renovated? One character in particular, the Schoolmaster, has a unique struggle with the changing moral codes in Gullen. The Schoolmaster tries to remain loyal to his traditional Western principles, but is so tempted by a million dollars

that he accepts Claire's new world order. He walks a fine line between moral and immoral. Some literary critics believe that the Schoolmaster is immoral because he participates in the murder. Others argue that, although he succumbs to the temptation, he is the character who attempts to reject Claire's new world order the most. This study focuses on the Schoolmaster's struggle to juxtapose and justify these contradictory moral codes, and accept them both. The Schoolmaster is neither moral nor immoral, but the embodiment of the conflict between the traditional Western principles and Claire's new world order, which is resolved in his acceptance of both as one corruptible and perverted moral code.

The conflict of the play lies within the moral differences between traditional Western principles and Claire's new world order. By literal definition, "moral" means "of, pertaining to, or concerned with the principles or rules of right conduct or the distinction between right and wrong" (Dictionary.com). This distinction between right and wrong is determined by society. Because this definition is so fluid, it is able to be influenced by several factors; including religion, economy, and global affairs. One's morality can be determined based on the loyalty the individual exhibits to the accepted moral code in society. Most importantly, it also implies that the moral code can be changed by the simple consensus of a society. In *Güllén*, the townsfolk are loyal to their traditional Western principles. Although Dürrenmatt does not specify exactly what these traditional Western principles are, by the actions of the Gülleners, it can be assumed that these principles condone murder and perjury, and support justice and truth. Conversely, Claire's "new world order" moral code supports a wicked version of the traditional Western principles. Again, Dürrenmatt does not explicitly describe Claire's new world order, but based on Claire's actions and motives, the foundation of her moral code can be defined. In Claire's moral code, it is acceptable to be a mercenary, revenge is justifiable, and capital punishment is suitable. Most

importantly, in this moral code, justice can be bought; Claire boasts, “With financial resources like mine you can afford a new world order. The world turned me into a whore. I shall turn the world into a brothel ... And I’m paying [Güllen] for a murder, a boom for a body” (*The Visit*, 67). Claire’s purpose in Güllen is to transform the moral code from the traditional Western principles to her new world order. The transformation that occurs in Güllen is social experiment that “demonstrates how a basic change in social values can be effected through consensus – a change that can fundamentally change the moral foundations of Western culture” (Daviau & Dunkle, 303). The Schoolmaster is the only character who analyzes these seemingly very different moral codes. This examination of moral codes is the foundation of the genre of theatre, known as Theatre of the Absurd, which Dürrenmatt and several others invented during the post-World War Two era in Europe. This was a time when artists and playwrights began to question the moral codes that existed in the world.

The Visit is an example of the theater genre Theatre of the Absurd and Dürrenmatt incorporated the genre of tragicomedy to further convey his messages in the play. Theatre of the Absurd is the term devised in the 1960s to describe the theatrical genre that emerged in response to the ethical atrocities committed during the Second World War. This genre “shook the validity of any conventions and highlighted the precariousness of human life and its fundamental meaninglessness and arbitrariness ... it was a reaction to the disappearance of the religious dimension” (Čulík). Popularized by Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, and Friedrich Dürrenmatt, this genre questioned life, morality, action, God, and society. Dürrenmatt was specifically interested in moral codes and society. In his manifesto “Problems of the Theater,” he describes the type of theatre that belongs to his contemporary society. He rejects Aristotle’s notion of “pure” theatre and asserts that “pure” theatre does not properly represent contemporary life,

especially that of post-World War Two (“Problems,” 233). Dürrenmatt perceives the world to be not pure, but full of paradoxes; he comments: “the atom bomb exists: out of fear of the bomb” (“Problems,” 255). In this enigmatic way, Dürrenmatt believes that “comedy is the only thing that can still reach us ... [and] we can achieve tragedy out of comedy” (“Problems,” 255). He uses grotesque irony to convey this tragedy through comedy, such as the name of the town: Güllen which means “liquid manure” in German; and the idea that Alfred “died of joy” when in actuality he was strangled by the townsfolk (*The Visit* 97; Klarmann, 102). German literary critic, Kenneth Whitton, asserts that “what makes the village meeting comically [ironic is] the people of Güllen swear to stamp out injustice because they cannot tolerate a crime ... but we know that this very vow implies a crime” (114). Dürrenmatt attempts to use comedy to convey a sense of tragedy as he uses immorality to teach a sense of morality to his audience. He does this by using the Schoolmaster character to contrast two different moral codes to achieve a sense of true, grander morality.

When looking at *The Visit* and its characters from a narrow, modern, Western lens, it is easy to label the Schoolmaster as immoral. The Schoolmaster, “in terms of the traditional [Western] ethic [is] noble and idealistic, but Claire’s newer philosophy makes [him] out to be [a fool]” (Daviau & Dunkle, 310). The Schoolmaster is a laughable character because of the hypocrisy of his morality. The Schoolmaster vowed to teach the children of Güllen the traditional Western principles, and he therefore has “a particular set of values or tradition to uphold [and represent]” (Daviau & Dunkle, 309). Yet he increases the town’s debt and therefore slowly leads to the death of Alfred. Despite the Mayor’s triumphant rejection of Claire’s offer “in the name of humanity,” the Schoolmaster and the people of Güllen increase their debts and gradually begin to adopt Claire’s new world order (*The Visit*, 39). In UC Irvine’s 2013

production, Director Page had the Schoolmaster buy new, expensive clothes and yellow shoes. With every purchase and the increase of debt, the Gülleners increase the need to kill Alfred. German literary experts, Daviau & Dunkle note that “the visual signs of prosperity are also the dramatist’s means of externalizing the psychological [moral] transformation occurring within the characters” (309). The Schoolmaster and Doctor realize this conversion, and try to stop Claire, but she just validates their worst fears – that they must kill Alfred to obtain the million dollars:

Schoolmaster: The Gülleners have most, most regrettably acquired a number of new possessions.

...

Claire: In debt?

Schoolmaster: Hopelessly.

Claire: In spite of your principles?

Schoolmaster: We’re only human.

Doctor: And now we must pay our debts.

Claire: You know what you have to do. (*The Visit*, 65).

Here, the Schoolmaster wholly learns the gravity of Gullen’s situation and understands what the town must do to pay their debt. He is immoral because participates in this sordid act of murder. According to Whitton, the Schoolmaster’s character is one of the most comedic and dismissive characters in the play (104). Once he realizes the implications of his immoral actions, the Schoolmaster “makes the final plea to Claire not to drive the villagers to murder Ill and, when that fails, he takes refuge in [alcohol]” (Whitton, 104). It should also be noted that this alcohol was bought on credit (*The Visit*, 77). The Schoolmaster is a pathetic character because after failing his last “attempt to become ‘human’ ... he joins the others in accepting Claire’s offer and participating in Ill’s execution” (Whitton, 104). The Schoolmaster reveals his true weak nature by succumbing to alcohol and Claire’s perverse sense of morals. And in the end, Whitton asserts that “there is no remorse, no sense of guilt. [The Gülleners] have learned nothing. Ill’s sacrifice ... was in vain” (118). The Schoolmaster is weak and grossly immoral for his actions all

throughout the play. While Whitton makes a valid argument about the weakness of the Schoolmaster, he does not take into consideration several factors: Dürrenmatt's intentions, the fluidity of moral codes, the actual transition of morals taking place in Gullen, or the Schoolmaster's admittance that "[his] faith in humanity is powerless to stop [the change in moral codes]" (*The Visit*, 77). German scholar, Roger Crockett makes the very opposite observation of Whitton; he comments that "the Gulleners are three-dimensional. They are people who put up a credible fight against overwhelming temptation" (Crockett, 82). While the Schoolmaster may give into Claire's temptation, he is still loyal to many of his principles.

Although it is undeniable that the Schoolmaster ultimately succumbs to Claire's new world order, many critics assert that the Schoolmaster is the one character "who understands better than anyone else the cultural and moral implications of the town's actions" (Daviau & Dunkle, 310). Initially, the Schoolmaster is moral because he is the character who fights the hardest to reject Claire's new world order. He fights three major battles in *The Visit*: in the Train Station scene, in Peterson's Barn, and in Alfred's shop. In Guajome Park Academy's 2011 production, Director Canaletti had the Schoolmaster not acquire any debt. By doing so, the Schoolmaster remained moral according to his set of traditional Western values. Fearing the Gulleners will kill Alfred, the Schoolmaster appears at the Train Station earnestly encouraging Alfred to leave Gullen, crying "my dear man, will you please get on the train" (*The Visit*, 62). When the Schoolmaster fails to help Alfred escape Gullen, he and the Doctor rush to Peterson's Barn to persuade Claire to withdraw the price of Alfred's murder. He tries to persuade her with a business proposition to "invest a few hundred thousand, carefully [and] systematically ... don't simply squander a million!" (*The Visit*, 65). But Claire rejects their offer in favor of her revenge. After this devastating news, the Schoolmaster drinks too much and in a drunken fit shouts to the

press, “I want to talk about the old lady’s visit to [Güllen] ... even if our poverty endures forever” (*The Visit*, 73). His outburst continues until the painter strikes him with a canvas and Alfred yells for silence. Finally, the Schoolmaster is defeated (*The Visit*, 72-74). Because of the Schoolmaster’s relentless crusade, Crockett claims that the Schoolmaster is “the last humanist left in Güllen” (84).

In addition, the Schoolmaster is moral because he adheres to the values established in in Güllen. As stated earlier, morals are the shared consensus of the people, and these principles are subject to change according to the consent of society. In Güllen, their traditional Western principles are replaced by Claire’s new world order. While the Schoolmaster may have been late to join “Claire’s New World Order” bandwagon, he did not behave immorally. If he had opposed Claire’s moral system, then he would have been labeled as immoral by the Gülleners. It is at the Town Meeting that Güllen, including the Schoolmaster, formally accepts Claire’s new world order, and the Schoolmaster concedes:

Gülleners: I want to raise one point we must all clearly understand – namely, in making her donation ... what is [Claire Zahanassian] aim? Is it her aim to make us happy with money? ... You know very well that it is not. Madame Claire Zahanassian has a more important aim. Her aim is to have the spirit of this community transformed – transformed into the spirit of justice (*The Visit*, 91).

By voting to murder Alfred III and participating in his execution, the Schoolmaster was not necessarily acting immorally, but was adhering to the newly accepted moral code of Güllen. In the contemporary Güllen, that ruled by Claire’s new world order, “wealth, pleasure, and freedom from action have become the new catch-words” that govern the lives of the characters (Daviau & Dunkle, 315). By their new standards, murdering Alfred for the betterment of Güllen was not immoral. The Schoolmaster too has accepted this new moral code and has renovated his sense of ideals.

However, I would like to assert that the Schoolmaster cannot be labeled as solely moral or immoral. Instead, he has accepted a corrupted moral code that consents to the execution of Alfred in the name of traditional Western principles. This is a reflection of one of Dürrenmatt's strongest beliefs: that the world is no longer pure but instead, full of paradoxes (“Problems”). The Schoolmaster is a character that exemplifies this notion. He is a fighter, yet a coward; he is a humanitarian, yet a murderer; he is moral, yet immoral. The Schoolmaster believes in the traditional Western principles *and* Claire’s new world order; two seemingly contradictory moral codes that actually complement each other. The Schoolmaster was unable to choose between the traditional Western principles that he has so diligently preached beyond all hope and Claire’s new appealing world of justice and truth; so instead, the Schoolmaster soaked himself in alcohol and became convinced that the two moral codes are in fact, the same. At the Town Meeting, the Schoolmaster announces his realization of the principles of Claire’s new world order, declaring:

We are not moved by the money ... we are moved by this matter of justice, and the problem of how to apply it. Nor yet by justice alone, but also by all those ideals, for which our forbearers lived and fought, and for which they died; and which constitute the values of our Western principles. When individual persons slight the ideal of brotherly love, disobey the commandment to succor the weak, spurn the marriage vow, deceive the courts and plunge young mothers into misery, then Freedom is at stake (*The Visit*, 91-2).

In this powerful monologue, the Schoolmaster reinterprets Claire’s moral code to be identical to the traditional Western principles that he vowed to uphold. The Schoolmaster supports the ideals of traditional Western principles about justice and truth, but after enduring Claire’s harsh trial, the Schoolmaster’s understanding of those traditional principles was corrupted and ultimately collapsed into Claire’s new world order. By justifying himself in this monologue, the Schoolmaster rationalizes his decision to accept Claire’s offer and kill Alfred. Because he believes that Claire’s moral code is the traditional Western principles, the Schoolmaster does not act immorally. Again, this concept of impure characters derives from Dürrenmatt’s idea that the

world is full of paradoxes. And Dürrenmatt attempts to show the audience a comedic yet tragic situation, a paradox, to invoke change to better contemporary audiences.

The close of the play is truly something horrendous: Güllen along with the Schoolmaster kill Alfred, and simply go on about their lives. This strange acceptance and rejection of specific morals is surreal and absurd to the audience, which was exactly Dürrenmatt's intention; as Daviau and Dunkle observe: "[*The Visit*'s] nightmarish apocalyptic ending offers viewers an opportunity to rethink their social goals and criteria" (305). The audience is stupefied by the unsurprising decision made by the Gülleners. It leaves the audience wondering if Güllen made the right decision, but more importantly, if they too would make the same decision. The audience feels stripped of their moral security and vulnerable to the powerful influence of Claire Zachanassian, money, and the daunting desire to be justified rather than being moral. The audience can connect with the struggle of the Schoolmaster, while not always condoning his final decision. In Dürrenmatt's "Problems of Theater," he asserts, because of the insensitivity of the world, everything is no longer black and white. Individuals like the Schoolmaster live in a hazy and strange world of gray, but sometimes that is suitable. People believe so strongly in one moral code without realizing some of the darker shadows of this code. Traditional Western principles are founded upon justice – but, as Claire demonstrated, justice can be bought. And crimes must be punished, sometimes with death. Those principles are not so different from Claire's new world order. In effect, the play demonstrates that these two outwardly different moral codes are identical; one is just more honest about the corruptibility of the moral code. Through the Schoolmaster, Dürrenmatt shows that the conflicting perspectives of moral and immoral can coexist in one individual and in one society.

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