

Candidate evidence

Candidate1

Justice can be bought.

With reference to a German-language text, discuss to what extent you agree or disagree with this statement.

“The scales of justice are tilted by money”

This quote by Justin Wetch, from the book ‘Bending The Universe’, references one of the main ideas discussed in the play ‘Der Besuch der alten Dame’ by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, a Swiss dramatist. The play is a tragic comedy, set in Switzerland shortly after the Second World War in a town much like many others in post-war Europe, when many areas were weakened by the damage sustained during the war and were struggling to rebuild themselves. Güllen, the Swiss town in which the play is set, is in a dire situation. In the past, Güllen was a town of prosperity and cultural significance; however, it now finds itself deep in poverty, forgotten by the outside world.

In the play, the famous billionaire-ess Claire Zachanassian (née Wäscher) returns on a visit to Güllen, her hometown, whose residents are waiting in great anticipation for both her and the wealth she will bring with her. Claire promises the town a billion of their currency shortly after her arrival, but quickly makes it clear under what circumstances she will donate the money – if Alfred III, her childhood sweetheart who abandoned and betrayed her when she was pregnant with his child, is killed.

“Eine Milliarde für Güllen, wenn jemand Alfred III tötet”¹

Claire’s butler, who is revealed to have been the judge from the court case between III and Claire, informs Güllen (and the audience) that III had bribed two men to lie in the court hearing and say that they also slept with Claire, to shift the parental burden off of his shoulders. The men themselves reveal what III did and confess to their lies, saying

“Wir haben falsch geschworen, wir haben falsch geschworen ... III hat uns bestochen, III hat uns bestochen.”²

The idea of justice being skewed by money is introduced in this early section of the play – Alfred III used money to ‘tilt the scales of justice’ and free himself of his legal responsibilities as a father to Claire’s child, leaving him free to go and marry another woman, with whom he had fallen in love. As a result of the court case, Claire was forced into prostitution until she found her first husband, Zachanassian, and started on her path to great wealth and fame. Now Claire is seeking revenge – she seeks to kill III for betraying her and ruining her life. In the same way that III used money long ago to twist the outcome of the court case, Claire is now using her money and affluence to convince the town’s residents to murder one of their own.

At first, the Gülleners are shocked at the proposal, and refuse to partake in such an immoral deal, no matter who Claire is and how desperately Güllen needs the money that she offers, as shown by the Mayor’s outraged declaration;

“Ich lehne im Namen der Stadt Güllen das Angebot ab. Im Namen der Menschlichkeit. Lieber bleiben wir arm denn blutbefleckt.”³

¹ ‘Der Besuch der alten Dame’ – p49

² ‘Der Besuch der alten Dame’ – p48

³ ‘Der Besuch der alten Dame’ – p50

The mayor showcases how Gullen is a fair, civilised, humane town, when he tells Claire that the death sentence has been abolished, and that this means they are not willing to play any part in her murderous revenge.

“Die Todesstrafe ist in unserem Land abgeschafft, gnadige Frau.”⁴

However, Claire knows that this will not be the end – she states simply *“Ich warte”*⁵, with an attitude that tells she is confident about her chances of getting exactly what she wants – she is clever, manipulative, and not afraid to be patient in order to achieve her goal. Claire knows that with her wealth and influence, the Gulleners will eventually be convinced to abandon the morals they once were so sure of, with the promise of so much prosperity – they will be corrupted by greed and the promise of wealth. Claire is well aware of the power that her and her wealth have to tilt the sense of right and wrong – she knows, perhaps all too well when one considers her past, how wealth can twist justice; and she fully intends to use this against Ill.

Despite the mayor refusing Claire’s offer, the audience starts to notice some changes in the Gulleners – Ill also notices their altered behaviour, adding to a growing paranoia that he harbours until the climax of the play’s events. The next scene takes place in Ill’s shop, where various residents come in and purchase their groceries. However, every one of them purchases something better than they usually buy and ask Ill to put it on credit. This is the first hint that the residents of Gullen have not given up hope on receiving wealth from Claire – they know the terms of Claire’s deal, and yet they seemingly have not ruled out the possibility of accepting her deal. The reader recognises what this could mean for Ill’s fate, while Ill slowly builds up to this realisation himself during this scene and the scenes to come. In this scene, two women come in and ask for milk – Ill turns to give them one litre of their regular milk, but they quickly correct him.

Die erste Frau – “Vollmilch, Herr Ill.”

Die zweite Frau – “Zwei Liter Vollmilch, Herr Ill.”⁶

They then proceed to buy butter, white bread, and chocolate as well, telling Ill to put it on credit. More customers come in, and Ill remarks on how many customers he is suddenly getting.

“Eine Kundschaft habe ich diesen Morgen. Sonst die ganze Zeit niemand, und nun strömt’s seit einigen Tagen.”⁷

The customers tell Ill it is simply because they all support him. However, after several more customers, Ill suddenly notices that everyone has brand new yellow shoes. Ill is very accustomed to his town’s poverty; and so, this sudden show of expenditure deeply unsettles him. He immediately suspects Claire, and begins to worry that the sudden willingness of the Gulleners to spend money on such things means that Claire’s offer of wealth has not been as widely rejected as he thought. He goes to the mayor, the policeman, and finally the priest for help to quell his sudden fears – however, he finds that each of them has also bought something expensive, that they would not normally be able to afford. The town of Gullen has already stated that they would never kill Ill, as this is a horribly inhumane thing to do. However, Ill is seeing now that the promise of so much money has changed the Gulleners, although none of them will admit it. He says to the priest,

⁴ Der Besuch der alten Dame’ – p29

⁵ ‘Der Besuch der alten Dame’ – p50

⁶ ‘Der Besuch der alten Dame’ – p54

⁷ ‘Der Besuch der alten Dame’ – p56

“Keiner will mich töten, jeder hofft, dass es einer tun werde, und so wird es einmal einer tun.”⁸

The Gülleners will not admit it, perhaps not even to themselves, but they secretly hope that somebody will kill Ill, and thus bring them prosperity and wealth. The promise of this wealth has changed them – and so, the idea of justice being skewed by money is once again brought to the forefront. Money is slowly but surely convincing the Gülleners that such an awful, murderous act would not be so bad – they are being blinded by the thought of riches and living in great comfort, so much so that they are losing sight of their once-strong morals.

In the third act, Claire is approached by the doctor and the teacher, who appeal to her to donate the money to the town without the death of Ill. However, she tells them about how Ill’s actions ruined her life, and the hardships she faced as a result of her abandonment. She then denies their request, saying,

“Die Menschlichkeit, meine Herren, ist für die Börse der Millionäre geschaffen, mit meiner Finanzkraft leistet man sich eine Weltordnung ... Anständig ist nur, wer zahlt, und ich zahle. Güllen für einen Mord, Konjunktur für eine Leiche.”⁹

Claire knows that those with money have power, and that she can use her money to influence actions and gain a position of power and authority. This was shown in the first act, when she first offers Güllen a billion of their currency in return for justice.

Der Bürgermeister - *“Die Gerechtigkeit kann man doch nicht kaufen!”*

Claire Zachanassian - *“Man kann alles kaufen.”¹⁰*

She states very clearly that if the Gülleners want their town to be prosperous once more, they will have to give her the body of Alfred Ill; this reflects the way in which she was forced to give up her own body to prostitution in order to survive when he abandoned her. In her own way she is getting justice, using almost the same method of twisting justice with money that Ill himself used on her – this is somewhat hypocritical, although Claire sees it as justified as she is essentially ‘getting even’ with Ill for the horrible thing he did to her.

Eventually, the town holds a meeting, in the presence of many reporters, where they decide whether or not they are going to accept Claire’s generous offer and follow the path of ‘justice’. The reporters do not know the conditions of said justice, but the Gülleners and Ill do – and when they decide to accept her offer, Ill is taken into the empty auditorium and surrounded by the entirety of Güllen resulting in his quick death, discovered to be from a heart attack. Claire arrives, furnishes the mayor with the promised cheque, and promptly leaves with Ill’s corpse. At the conclusion of the play, Ill is dead, the Gülleners are rich, and Claire has achieved her one goal – her own form of justice.

There are many themes mentioned in the play, but the idea of justice being bought pervades the text. Payhuber (2012) states that *“Korruption und Machtmissbrauch verhindern die Realisierung [von Recht und Gesetz]”¹¹*, highlighting that corruption and the rule of law are incompatible. The events before the start of the play, where Ill paid off two men to twist the court case in his favour, show that money has the power to pervert the course of justice, and condemn an innocent person to a fate they do not deserve while letting the one responsible walk free. Then when Claire arrives,

⁸ Der Besuch der alten Dame’ – p71

⁹ Der Besuch der alten Dame’ – p91

¹⁰ Der Besuch der alten Dame’ – p45

¹¹ Payhuber (2012) – p66

she proves that the mere promise of wealth and prosperity is enough to drive an entire town to committing the heinous, almost treasonous, act of murdering one of their own, the popular, well-liked Alfred Ill. Dürrenmatt has succeeded in not only telling a humorous, enjoyable, dark tragic-comedy, but also in successfully exploring how money can 'tilt the scales of justice' and can have great influence on the actions of ordinary people, pushing them to do the unthinkable. I believe that this theme is very effectively explored in the play through great characterisation, dialogue, and plot, and I have greatly enjoyed its thought-provoking content.

Bibliography

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Please tick (✓) the option chosen and note the portfolio title. A tick (✓) should also be entered to confirm the inclusion of the bibliography, and the word count should be indicated.

Portfolio option (please tick (✓) <u>one</u> option only)		
Literature	✓	
Media		
Language in Work		
Portfolio title	Justice can be bought. With reference to a German-language text, discuss to what extent you agree or disagree with this statement.	
Bibliography enclosed (please tick) (✓)	✓	
Word count (excluding quotations and bibliography)	1612	

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