Justice and Morality in The Visit

Claire’s quest to win justice for Ill’s betrayal propels the plot of The Visit, and she desires to take Ill’s life (and destroy his reputation) as punishment for his past wrongs. In many stories that depict a person avenging past wrongs, the ultimate verdict is seen to vindicate justice, truth, and morality. The Visit, however, uses Claire’s quest for justice—and the vapid and shifting definitions of justice to which the townspeople subscribe—to call into question whether “justice” is a concept with any meaning at all.

From the very beginning, justice means something different to each of the central characters in the play. To Claire, justice is the same as vengeance—it is her desire for disproportionate retribution against someone who wronged her forty-five years ago. This “justice” is not rooted in any external set of rules or guidelines, like religion or the law—rather, it is something to which Claire, who is driven by self-interest, feels personally entitled. Furthermore, Claire treats justice as a commodity to be bought or sold. When she offers the town a billion dollars in exchange for Ill’s death, the Mayor protests that “justice can’t be bought,” but Claire responds that “Everything can be bought.” Thus, as Claire herself admits, it’s wealth that allows her to seek the precise “justice” she desires by essentially bribing the entire town to provide it.

For Ill, however, justice requires accountability to one’s own actions. As the town turns against him, Ill retreats inward and, in time, accepts his inevitable death as punishment for his betrayal of Claire. “I turned Clara into what she is,” he says, “and myself into what I am, a grimy, petty shopkeeper.” With no recourse (since all of Güllen’s institutions have decided to kill him), Ill stops trying to justify his actions, and he simply acknowledges the pain he caused years ago. In the end, this sets him apart from his fellow Gülleners, who refuse to ever acknowledge their own moral failings. It also sets him apart from Claire, whose development as a character is static and stunted; she remains vengeful from beginning to end. Ill, meanwhile, undergoes a transformation from “a grimy, petty shopkeeper” into someone willing to hold himself and others to abstract ideals; when the Mayor suggests that Ill commit suicide and save the town the trouble of having to kill him, he refuses. The town, too, he argues, must assume responsibility for accepting Claire’s dubious bargain.

For the townspeople, “justice” is an empty word—one that carries connotations of “doing the right thing,” but is actually unconnected to any real principles and is therefore easily twisted to accommodate greed and self-interest. Upon hearing Claire’s offer, the people of Güllen proudly and defiantly refuse. “[W]e are still in Europe,” the Mayor reminds Claire. “We’re not savages yet. In the name of the town of Güllen, I reject your offer. In the name of humanity. We would rather be poor than have blood on our hands.” Despite the mayor’s stated commitment to
principle, this speech is quickly revealed to be empty: it is not long before the people of Güllen begin living above their means, implicitly acknowledging their intent to comply with Claire’s bargain. At first, even with their most flagrant extravagances on full view, the townsfolk deny that their values have changed or that they intend to satisfy Claire’s demands. However, once they can no longer deny their intentions, they change their concept of justice in order to fit their actions, rather than holding their actions accountable to their concept of justice.

This is clearest in the contrast between the Mayor’s first speech refusing Claire’s offer and the Teacher’s speech at the trial in the third act. The Teacher’s speech mirrors the Mayor’s in its emphasis of principles (“The issue here is not money. [...] It is not prosperity, a comfortable way of life, luxury; the issue is whether we want to make justice a reality, and not only justice but all the ideals...that constitute the true value of our Western world.”). However, while the Mayor had invoked these same principles to refuse Claire’s offer, the Teacher is invoking them to justify accepting it. In this context, “justice” becomes essentially meaningless—an empty commodity disguised as morality. Justice, Dürrenmatt suggests, can be bought and principles and ideals are only relevant insofar as they are convenient.