The Question of Guilt in \textit{M} and “The Criminal of Lost Honor”

The question of guilt is a seemingly easy and straightforward question to answer. Generally the person who commits the crime—whether it be theft, perjury, or murder—is the one most often found to be guilty. In fact, most people would argue that, since the ultimate decision of whether or not to commit a criminal act lies with the criminal himself, it is only he who should be held responsible for his actions. However, as is often the case in situations dealing with both moral and ethical dilemmas of the mind, the lines between the guilt of and innocence of a criminal are blurred and, in some cases, the guilt may belong to more than just the actual criminal. Though the criminal is often himself guilty for the actual commission of a crime, extenuating circumstances sometimes exist that affect both his own criminality as well as the distribution of the guilt resulting from the commission of his crime. In Fritz Lang’s film \textit{M} as well as in Friedrich Schiller’s short story “The Criminal of Lost Honor: A True Story,” the unique circumstances surrounding the murders in each of the respective works bring to the forefront the general question of the guilt of the murderer and of the additional parties to whom the guilt may indirectly belong.

In director Fritz Lang’s 1931 German classic film, \textit{M}, the plot centers around the search for a child serial killer in Berlin. As children disappear and their mangled bodies are discovered by the police, parents are more and more fervently urged to keep constant watch over their children. Children, in turn, are warned by their parents of the necessity to stay close to home so that they are further distanced from danger’s eager grasp. The movie begins with the acknowledgement that several children have already been murdered: the general populace is warned of the possible existence of a serial child-murderer, and parents are strongly encouraged to keep watchful eyes on their young children. Although the public is warned, it is not until the discovery of the murder of little Elsie Beckmann that hysteria erupts and outraged citizens adamantly demand the capture of the beast responsible for the murder of innocent, young children.

In one of the most interesting and unique scenes in the entire film, the capture of the serial killer becomes a race between the police and the criminals of Berlin. The police, seeking to placate and fulfill the public
outcry for justice, redouble their efforts to capture the serial killer; the criminals, realizing that their existence is threatened by the increased awareness of criminal activity (resulting from the amplified efforts of the police), take the law into their own hands and decide they themselves will capture and deal with the murderer. It is upon their capture of the murderer that the criminals declare themselves arbitrators of justice and, as such, simulate both order and impartiality in their skewed representation of a judge and a courtroom. In this antithetical justice scene, then, the true hypocrisy and selfishness of the criminals emerges, and the question of guilt is skillfully brought to the forefront.

The courtroom scene begins when the murderer, proclaiming his innocence and demanding his release, is dragged by his captors into a warehouse where he is thrust violently down a flight of stairs. Howling in indignation, he regains his footing and, upon turning around, is met by the glares of Berlin’s most hardened criminals, who stun him into silence. As the camera scans the room and focuses on the angry and outraged faces of the congregated mob, the fact becomes clear that the erosion and dilapidation of the room itself symbolically represents the moral and ethical degradation of its occupants. In fact, the irony of the situation—in which a band of felons has undertaken the task of judging and sentencing one of their own—is not lost upon the viewer as the atmosphere of criminality morphs into a complete mockery of justice. In their laughable interpretation of a courtroom, the felons appoint a judge as well as a criminal defender, while the remainder of their gathering is relegated to jury duty. Amid the cries of the rabble calling for the immediate death of the serial killer, the appointed “judge” states that, “[e]veryone sitting here is an expert in the rule of law . . . and will make sure that [the murderer] gets [his] rights.”1 The judge then reassures the murderer that he “will even have a defense council. Everything according to the letter of the law,”2 a statement that is immediately negated by the fact that the entirety of the present crowd are perpetrators in their own right. These individuals falsely claim the right to enforce laws to which they themselves cannot adhere; in fact, many of the criminals present are just as guilty as the man they seek to condemn. Even the so-called judge, when reminded of his own criminality and the fact that he is wanted on “three accounts of manslaughter,”3 quickly dismisses the charges against him as irrelevant and un-relatable to the current case of the child-murderer.

As a result of the hypocrisy demonstrated by the crowd of criminals, the question of guilt becomes quite an issue, especially as the murderer

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1 M, directed by Fritz Lang (1931; Criterion 2004), DVD.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
realizes the unlikelihood that his unique circumstances will be reviewed and taken into account by such a lawless and rowdy crowd. The judge, though guilty of murder, uses the completely ludicrous argument that his crimes as well as the murders that he himself has previously committed are in no way comparable to those murders committed by the man that he seeks to condemn. The “judge” and all of the criminals present are, however, the ultimate representation of hypocrisy because each, in his own right, is guilty of committing crimes against both humanity and against society. In fact, Lang suggests that these criminals are guiltier than the murderer whose death they so adamantly demand. By showcasing the criminality and true guilt of these men, Lang juxtaposes the insanity of the murderer with the sanity of the criminals who surround him, which suggests that the murderer is neither humanly nor mentally capable of resisting the urge to kill. As Michael Hoffheimer states, “just punishment must proceed only from free acts of a responsible individual.”

Hoffheimer’s statement iterates the fact that because the murderer is not fully in control of his actions, he is not fully responsible for them and, therefore, should not be punished as such. In one of the most powerful scenes in the movie, the criminal sinks to his knees where, clenching his teeth and wringing his hands, he exclaims “But I can’t help it! I can’t. I really can’t help it . . . I want to run—run away from myself . . . How it screams and cries out inside me when I have to do it! Don’t want to! Must! And then a voice cries out, and I can’t listen anymore!” In this exclamation, the murderer admits that he has no choice, and he hates himself as a result. He confesses that even though he tries to stop himself and to resist the urge to kill, the compulsion overtakes him so that he has no choice but to give in. In fact, throughout his explanation, his repetition of the same statement two or three times provides further evidences of his compulsive nature. The fact that he is not fully in control of his actions and that he is not able to control himself stresses the abnormality of the circumstances associated with the murders that he commits. The murderer, then, is differentiated from the criminals that surround him by the fact that he does not choose to murder, but is compelled to do so.

Though the murderer tries to resist the urge to kill and hates himself for his inability to do so, the compulsion overtakes him and he must obey, he must kill. The criminals around him, on the other hand, freely choose to commit their crimes—they have the ability to control themselves and rationalize, while he, unfortunately, does not. Lang brilliantly uses this

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5 Lang, M.
scene to prove that, in contrast to the decisive guilt exhibited by his prosecutors, the murderer, though guilty to a certain degree, is rendered somewhat less so because he cannot control his own decisions; yes, he is guilty of murder, but his guilt is compounded by the fact that he cannot actively resist the compulsion to kill. The fact that the murderer is so wracked by shame and guilt over his inability to control himself also brings to the forefront the guilt of the murdered children’s parents. By refusing to keep a watchful eye on their children at all times, the parents left their children susceptible to become victims: as a result of their negligence, they shoulder a portion of the guilt for the deaths of their children. The responsibility and guilt of the children’s parents is cemented most effectively when, at the end of the film, Elsie Beckmann’s mother states: “In the name of the people. This will not bring our children back. One has to keep closer watch over the children! All of you.” Though the parents in no way meant for their children to be killed, their momentary laxness resulted in irrevocable, life-altering consequences for all of the parties involved. It was the parents’ inability to watch over their children that made the children such easy prey for the murderer, who, compelled to kill and unable to resist the compulsion, kidnapped and subsequently murdered them.

Just as there are certain circumstances in *M* that lead to a unique distribution of guilt between the murderer and the parents of the murdered children, there also exist extenuating circumstances within Friedrich Schiller’s “The Criminal of Lost Honor: A True Story,” which lead to a unique division of the guilt associated with the criminality of the killer. Schiller, in the introduction of his short story, states that “[i]n the entire history of humankind, there is no chapter more instructive for the heart and the mind than the annals of human aberrations. For every great crime committed, an equally great force was at work.” In this opening statement, Schiller directly informs the reader that his story will be a study in the psychology of human decision-making as well as an exploration of the circumstances that lead to and subsequently influence the choices of one man. Schiller’s story relates the tale of Christian Wolf, a young man who is both poor and “so unattractive that [his appearance] caused all women to shrink back from him and provided rich fodder for the wit of his companions.” Schiller frequently emphasizes Wolf’s poverty and ugliness in an attempt to convey how both significantly influence his life.

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6 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 41.
Because he is ugly, Wolf is constantly ridiculed by others and is rejected by the women for whom he has feelings. In fact, his poverty, combined with his blatantly unattractive appearance, leads him to illegally poach animals. Doing so allows him to secure enough money to lure Johanne, the object of his affection and love, with promises of finery and a financially stable marriage. Unfortunately, when another of Johanne’s suitors, Robert, turns Wolf in for poaching, Wolf is forced to pay a fine which results in a loss of his income and of Johanne’s favor, which directly results in her disavowal of Wolf and her subsequent marriage to Robert. Afterwards, Wolf, unable to find a job, returns to poaching in order to support himself and after being caught, is put in jail.

Once released from jail, Wolf soon returns to poaching a third time as he is unable to find a steady means of income; however, his harsh punishment as a result of his third transgression results in the ethical degradation of his character. Though his crime is committed because he has no other options, none of the prosecutors “looked into the psychological constitution of the accused.” Their refusal to acknowledge the fact that Wolf is forced to poach in order to survive ensures that he, placed in the company of murderers and thieves, “entered the dungeon as a lost soul . . . and left it as a criminal.” Because Wolf is sentenced to serve time with men whose crimes far exceed his own, he is forced to adapt to a life of brute toughness and villainy in order to survive their company. Wolf states: “I needed someone to stand by me, and if I am to be entirely honest, I needed sympathy, and this I had to buy with the last remnant of my conscience.” Wolf admits that the uncaring and unsympathetic way that he has been treated all of his life is largely responsible for the loss of his morality and ethics; he quits trying to appease and to belong within a society that has treated him so badly. Instead, he chooses to find camaraderie with criminals and to embrace their acceptance of his flaws, which have been pointed out so affably by the rest of the outside community.

Upon Wolf’s release from prison, it becomes apparent that his previous desire to uphold his good and honorable values no longer exists. In fact, he ultimately defies those values when, wandering in the forest, he happens upon Robert, the man who turned him in for poaching and stole away his beloved Johanne. Wolf himself says that Robert was “the one person I hated more intensely than any living thing in the world and this person was suddenly subject to the mercy of my lead ball.” Wolf’s

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9 Ibid., 42.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 43.
12 Ibid., 45.
statement emphasizes the depth of his hatred for Robert—Robert ruined his life beyond repair, and, therefore, Wolf hates him. Wolf’s imprisonment has negatively affected his character, and his anger and hatred for the way he has been unjustly treated his entire life are obvious when he says: “In this moment it seemed to me as if the whole world was at stake in my shot and that all the hatred of my entire life had rushed into the one fingertip with which I was to apply all the deadly pressure.”

Wolf’s incarceration adds fuel to his anger and, no longer adherent to the acceptable social laws by which he was once bound, Wolf contemplates committing murder. His criminality ultimately wins over his ethics and though “vengeance and conscience wrestled unmercifully . . . vengeance won, and the forester lay dead on the ground.”

Wolf, once a good man, proves the extent to which the communal ridicule as well as his unjust imprisonment have affected him—his anger over his undue treatment combined with the cultivated criminality stemming from his stint in prison negatively influence and cement his decision to commit murder. Though Wolf makes the final choice to kill Robert—and, thus, is certainly guilty of murder—the guilt does not belong to him alone. It is precisely because “society regards him as a criminal and offers him no opportunity to find a place among his fellow citizens again, [that] he decides to live up to his [foul] reputation . . . as a gesture of rebellion against society.”

In other words, because society has chosen to treat Wolf as an outcast with no hope of redemption, he decides to embrace that reputation and become the person that people assume he already is.

By refusing to treat Wolf equally, the members of his community refuse to acknowledge his worth as a human being; instead they choose to single him out and pigeonhole him as an individual who deserves neither courtesy nor love. Although Wolf initially ignores his unfair treatment, adheres to good morals, and continues to practice socially acceptable and ethical behavior, eventually his anger and hatred for his unjust treatment spiral out of control and result in the murder of one of the individuals who treated him so cruelly. Wolf’s imprisonment for poaching also significantly alters his character such that he learns to embrace immoral behavior. Jailed for illegally poaching from so-called royal lands, he is forced to live with the likes of murderers and thieves. It is in prison, then, that Wolf, though he initially attempts to hold on to his goodness and morality, becomes more and more like the criminals who surround him. And the more like them that he becomes, the more he is accepted by

13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
them; unlike his community, who refuse to accept him no matter what he does, the criminals accept Wolf almost immediately, providing him with a bond of kinship and acceptance that he has never before experienced. The fact that he must seek acceptance from criminals, as well as the fact that he is placed among them in the first place, leaves some of the blame for his resultant criminality to both the community and to the legal authorities. His community’s refusal to accept him makes him such an outcast that he is forced to seek the acceptance of criminals, and, in so doing, becomes one. His criminality, then, is partially a result of the legal authority’s unjust punishment for his crime; had Wolf not been placed with such hardened criminals, he most likely would have held on to his good morals and continued to attempt to be a productive member of society. However, his desperation for approval coupled with his harsh sentencing leaves him susceptible to becoming one of the criminals who so freely offer him the respect, kinship, and approval that he desires. Similarly, portions of both the guilt for the murder he commits and the guilt for his poaching belong to the community that so easily disregards and unjustly dismisses him because of his poverty and unpleasing appearance.

Ultimately, the question of guilt is one that must be looked at in conjunction with the circumstances that lead to the criminal act. Though a criminal is most often guilty of the actual commission of the crime, sometimes other parties share a significant amount of the guilt and blame. In M, for instance, the murderer’s compulsion to kill is aided by the fact that parents leave their children susceptible to kidnap and murder. The parents share in some of the guilt for the death of their children because their negligence makes their children susceptible to kidnapping and murder. There are also certain circumstances in Friedrich Schiller’s short story “The Criminal of Lost Honor: A True Story” that result in distribution of guilt such that the murderer, Christian Wolf, is not wholly responsible. Within the story, the community that constantly refuses Wolf employment and ruthlessly ridicules him for his appearance is partly guilty for his resultant criminality. The legal authorities are also at fault since they, disregarding his impoverished circumstances, place him in a situation that renders him susceptible to the influence of the only people who had ever freely accepted him, the criminals with whom he is imprisoned. The guilt for the murder that Wolf commits upon his release from prison, then, belongs not only to him, but also to the community who constantly derides him as well as to the authorities who sentence him so harshly for the crimes he committed in order to survive.