Samuel Peter February 29, 2024

Professor Eric Miller COLT 28: Mind Reading

**Final Paper Part 1: Lieutenant Gustl**

Lieutenant Gustl takes place around 1900 in Vienna, the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which ended in 1918. Is it just a period piece? Or can it still speak to us in the 21st century? If so, how?

Although set in the early 20th century, Lieutenant Gustl by Arthur Schnitzler still speaks to readers in the 21st century on topics such as human psychology, addictions, and societal pressures. Besides addressing issues modern human society faces, this short story allows the reader to think critically about humanity’s previous and current efforts to address these issues. Questions the short story Lieutenant Gustl prompts the reader are: Can some of these issues be solved, given that humans living a century ago struggled with the same problems, and are these problems evolving as society evolves, or have we humans never addressed these issues in the first place?

The first topic in modern society that the short story addresses from the 20th century is human psychology. Although psychology is studied more now, compared to 1900, humans have barely scratched the surface of understanding how the human mind works. In Lieutenant Gustl, the readers get an uncensored view of the thoughts and feelings of Lieutenant Gustl. As a result, each reader interprets Lieutenant Gustl’s actions uniquely based on their own experiences and biases. The absence of a narrator further leaves topics and gaps in Lieutenant Gustl’s memories and actions to be debated by the readers. By questioning the complexities of Lieutenant Gustl’s mind, Arthur Schnitzler forces the readers to question the intricacies of our minds. How are we supposed to understand someone else and the workings of their mind when we can never truly understand ourselves and barely understand the workings of our mind? Questions like why we think the way we do or how humans determine which course of action to pursue our desired outcome(s) remain as much a debate today as they did in the 1900s. Seeing Lieutenant Gustl struggle to deal with so many things at once, like his honor, his duty, his annoyance at the people around him, his relationships with his family members and friends, and his moral conflict of completing his duty by challenging the chef to a duel for insulting him versus his desire to want to live, is also reflective of the struggles that humans face every day. Some of the pressures humans in modern society juggle are our jobs, relationships, food, and health, and we recently began to worry about the effects of global warming on our daily lives and activities. Seeing the immense suffering each person goes through daily, it is understandable why mindfulness and mindful practices have been gaining traction in all aspects of life in modern society.

Another topic that the short story covers that is still contextually relevant in modern society is personal addictions. We can conclude that Lieutenant Gustl is addicted to sex based on the direct quotation of his thoughts. Lieutenant Gust constantly thinks of the women at the opera at the start of the short story. Even as he leaves, he continues to make comments about their attractiveness and fails to acknowledge any other aspect of the women. Although this obsession with women is Schnitzler’s way of criticizing the supposedly high standards of the Code of Honor of the Austo-Hungarian Officer’s Corps, the reader can use Lieutenant Gustl’s obsession to highlight the numerous addictions someone in modern society might face. These addictions might come in the form of technology, social media, alcohol, and drugs. Coping mechanisms would vary from person to person; when we finally begin to understand human behavior from a psychological standpoint, we can offer rehabilitation for individuals to overcome their addictions.

Lastly, Lieutenant Gustl addresses the societal pressures one must face in modern society, just like individuals from the 1900s. One of the key topics covered in Lieutenant Gustl by Arthur Schnitzler is the idea of Lieutenant Gustl’s honor to the Code of Honor of the Austo-Hungarian Officer’s Corps, which states that Lieutenant Gustl must challenge anyone who insults him to a duel to maintain his reputation. Is an insult worth dying over? This question is a conflict that Lieutenant Gustl wrestles with before deciding to kill himself and avoid the embarrassment of losing a duel to the chef. This conflict in Lieutenant Gustl’s mind can translate to numerous modern societal pressures, such as toxic masculinity and the “golden handcuffs” of high-paying jobs. Societal pressure forces humans to decide what they should be doing versus what course of action they want to pursue. By choosing to follow their passions, humans fail to uphold the standards set upon them by society. By following societal pressures, humans fail to follow their passions/course of actions to a happy life, ultimately becoming anxious and depressed like Lieutenant Gustl.

In conclusion, despite being set in the early 20th century, Lieutenant Gustl is relatable to readers in the 21st century because Arthur Schnitzler addresses universal human issues that society still faces today. Some topics addressed in the short story that humans are still trying to understand are human psychology, addictions, and societal pressures. As a result, Lieutenant Gustle becomes a piece for the entirety of human history instead of being restricted as a timely literary work of the 1900s.