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Chaos and Stability in *The Crucible*

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The script of *The Crucible* is built on a structure of binary oppositions, particularly good vs. evil and stability vs. chaos. Revealing the structure deconstructs the binary oppositions and explains how the play challenges audiences to reconsider what they understand about good and evil in their contemporary times.

Keywords: Binary oppositions, *The Crucible*, good vs. evil

In *The Crucible* playwright, Arthur Miller used the Salem Witch Trials, which date back to colonial Massachusetts history, as an analogy for the hunt for communists in the U.S. government during the 1950s. An examination of the binary oppositions, particularly good/evil, reveals that Miller built the story lines and the characters in *The Crucible* upon a structure of good and evil confronting each other. This structure ultimately challenges the audience to reconsider its understanding of the role of the dominant ideology to manipulate good and evil for self-serving purposes. *The Crucible* is more than plot, is greater than the trials of the characters; the play deconstructs the social order in Salem in 1692, in American politics in the 1950s, and is always ready to challenge the audience perception of good and evil.

This analysis of Miller's use of binary oppositions to lead the audience to ideological positions demonstrates how the opposition of good and evil can be used in the mass media to manipulate the audience to ideological conclusions. The play also demonstrates that good and evil are not so clear cut as people in the mass media would lead us to believe.

The Plot

Superficially, *The Crucible* organizes the plot around simplistic concepts of good and evil. The people of the good are Christians, members of their church congregation. They pray frequently and practice virtuous lives. They seek to expose witchcraft in their community of Salem, Massachusetts. Accordingly, they support the work of the courts and its judges, who identify the witches and assign punishment to the wicked because the witches seek to turn the Salem residents away from God and to Satan. Satan is working in the village of Salem. The followers of Satan sign his book and appear as apparitions to tempt Christian people. Several adolescent girls were discovered dancing naked in the woods and drinking from the pot stirred over a fire by Tituba.

The power of good is allocated to Judge Danforth, who is sent by the governor of Massachusetts to preside over the court prosecuting the witches. Some convicted are hanged; many more are imprisoned. Danforth promises the good people of Salem that he has prosecuted many witches and sentenced them to the gallows. Danforth is the

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representative of the government, carrying out the justice of the church, of Christ, and God. He promises mercy to those who acknowledge they followed Satan and who turn back to God. The repentant witches prove they have truly returned to God by providing to the court the names of others who also followed Satan.

The Hierarchy

The Crucible in the first scene presents the goodness of adolescent girls, who are being threatened by the presence of evil, specifically Tituba but more generally Satan. Satan is in opposition to God, setting up another binary opposition: Christianity vs. witchcraft. Law and order represented by the court and its judges seek to restore order from chaos. The court can bring stability when the power of God and the church are restored to authority in Salem.

The characters tend to fit easily into the confrontation of good vs. evil, stability vs. chaos. Tituba conjures spirits and gathers souls for the devil. Other minor female characters are among “the twisted souls” in the play who have followed Satan. On the side of good stands Ezekiel Cheever, clerk of the court and a man who “knows the signs of hell.” Then there is the “wise” Judge Danforth, who has hanged 72 witches and imprisoned another 400.

This world of Salem created by Arthur Miller has a clearly articulated good and evil with Judge Danforth standing forth to bring stability by ending the evil threatening the hierarchy of good, justice, and Christianity. The audience, whether in 1952 when the play was written or in the 21st Century, would have little trouble understanding the resolutions of the binary oppositions of good and evil. However, the black and white world of Arthur Miller’s Salem has its elements of discord: John Proctor and Abigail Williams.

John and Abigail

Evil resides along with good in the characters of John Proctor and Abigail Williams. Miller has presented a society where God is the ultimate resolution of the binary oppositions and thus the basis of the dominant ideology in Salem. The church, the pastors, the court, and the judges exist in Salem to ensure that everyone follows the dominant ideology, thereby preserving stability. However, Salem is in chaos in the play because of the presences of the evil, which is witchcraft.

Miller writes John as a character that sometimes is good. He is a farmer and husband. He follows the Biblical commandments, is honest, and, as the script says, is “pure in heart,” and he “fears the Lord.” Then there is the evil side of his personality. John has strayed from his wife in his relationship with young, adolescent Abigail; not surprising, in the play, he does not remember the commandment on adultery. Sometimes he skips Sunday worship. He has been defined in the script as “befouled with Hell.” John recognizes his sinfulness. He is willing to confess to witchcraft, but not because he is a follower, but because he knows he has sinned. “I speak of my sins,” Proctor tells Danforth, but John “cannot judge others.” John begs Danforth to let him “keep his good name.” When Danforth requires John to provide the names of other witches, John refuses, choosing to hang instead. At this point, John’s wife, Elizabeth passes the final judgment on John: “He has his goodness now. God forbid I take it from him.” Thus, ends *The Crucible*.

Abigail’s character is dominant in the first half of the play. She confesses to dancing with the Devil when she and the other girls are discovered. Abigail laughs during prayer at church and drinks the blood of the chicken to conjure up the spirits of the dead.

Abigail speaks for the adolescent girls, some who are struck incapable of speech. Then, according to the script, Abigail “returns to Jesus” and to prove her conversion back to the good, Abigail seeks to end the chaos by being a witness in the court trials and naming witches. Abigail was evil and caught up in the chaos of witchcraft; Abigail becomes good and seeks stability by being the main witness for the court. As Abigail points out in the script to John, “And God gave me the strength to call them liars, and God made men listen to me, and by God, I will scrub the world clean for the love of Him.” And, then Abigail adds, “Oh, John, I will make you such a wife when the world is white again. You will be amazed to see me every day, light of heaven in your house....” Abigail becomes so certain of her goodness that she lectures Danforth: “Let you beware, Mister Danforth—think you to be so mighty that the power of Hell may not turn your wits.”

Abigail does the work of God and speaks the voice of God. She turns chaos into stability. Just as she is going to do for John—once Elizabeth is hanged for witchcraft and she can bring “the light of heaven in your house.” Abigail would become the hierarchal definition of good—once she is married to John. Abigail possesses all of the indicators of good: Loving wife, the light of heaven, redeemed by God, chosen by God, God’s voice on earth against witchcraft, tutor on rightness to Judge Danforth. To accomplish her Godly desires, Abigail only needs to use evil by falsely accusing and bearing witness against John’s wife, Elizabeth.

Discussion

Initially, Miller sets up a very clean set of the binary oppositions clearly understood by the audience. The hierarchy of the dominant ideological positions on God, church, and the court was the structure of good and stability in Salem and the opening of the play. The Godly go to church each Sunday to worship and pray. Then Miller dissolves the hierarchy with Abigail. She associates herself with the indicators of a good and Godly person and then perverts them with the darkest soul and most wicked soul of any character in the play. Judge Danforth cannot see the darkness in Abigail, which is evidence that the man who hanged 72 and jailed 400 witches may have had his “wits turned,” as the script explains, by the power of Hell. When the signifiers of good are a disguise for Hell, then good and evil are subverted, and the dominant ideology becomes a sham.

John becomes the tool for Miller to flip good and evil. Judge Danforth condemns John because Danforth cannot see the good in John, even as John admits his sin to God and Danforth. A condemned witch, Elizabeth refuses to save John’s life so that his soul may be saved. If John and Elizabeth, evil in the eyes of the law, are good in the eyes of God, then good has become evil and that labeled evil by the dominant ideology has become good.

The world of good and evil is not clear cut because evil can reside in a church, which dominated the world of Salem. Miller presents to the audience a conundrum. If good is sometimes good, but also sometimes evil, then may evil ultimately be good? The hierarchy of God, Christianity, church, pastors, the law, and the judge falls apart under the weight of its contradictions. To Arthur Miller, who should judge good and evil? What can create the stability of a hierarchy when the binary oppositions of good and evil are rotted? Societal institutions are inherently neither good nor stable.

Miller explained that he developed the concept for *The Crucible* while following the hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee on the radio while driving home from Salem, Massachusetts. Miller had gone to Salem to research the witch trials; he was interested in the committee hearings, which was looking for communists in the U.S.

government because he feared he would be labeled a communist. “What was manifestly parallel was the guilt, two centuries apart, of holding illicit, suppressed feelings of alienation and hostility toward the standard, daylight society as defined by its most orthodox proponents,” Miller wrote in his autobiography (341). In neither set of trials was anyone looking for the truth; the investigators wanted people to confess to what the judges already believed was the truth, pointed out Miller. It was these “internal parallelisms” that created the connection of past and present (340). And, it was the parallelisms that set up the binary oppositions, particularly of good and evil.

The structure of good and evil is not just the structure of *The Crucible*, but also of his life. Biographer Christopher Bigsby pointed out many binary oppositions in the Miller family structure: mother vs. father, mother vs. son, father vs. son, brother vs. brother. These conflicts show up in his plays, notes Bigsby. The rhythm that beats in most of Miller’s plays is one of the hopes that “are betrayed, ideals compromised, even lives lost while at the same time a current runs the other way, raising death in the direction of tragedy, redeeming the broken, discovering meaning in seemingly lost lives” (50).

The binary oppositions explain *The Crucible*’s long success to Cohagan: “The Crucible continues to be a mirror for people in any time and any place to view those devils which plague us.” He notes that the play has been associated with a wide range of situations where governmental good has come into conflict with social good. He writes “...The Crucible will remain timeless as it continues to ask its audience to explore how an individual’s conscience and choices affect, not only his or her sense of self, but society as a whole and how tyranny continues to mask itself in the guise of ‘the greater good.’” Botvinick has pointed out the binary oppositions in several of the characters in *The Crucible*. His description of Abigail: “One moment she is sweet, flirty, innocent, or vulnerable; the next she is vicious, icy, or hysterical” (76). Elizabeth is “cold” and “distrusting” while wanting to be a good wife, warm and understanding (76). Danforth is a stern man trapped in his religious convictions while seeking to be fair and a man who judges fairly (77). Casper notes that in some presentations of the play Danforth exhibits darkness and power that lead to his “dark deeds” (159).

Similar themes of conflicting binaries show up in other Miller plays. Day and Marino point them out in *After the Fall*. Dowden found them in Miller’s first play, *No Villain*. Enami described Willy as a defeated character, beaten by societal expectations in *Death of a Salesman*. Isherwood has also argued that Miller casts his characters against the walls erected by the social order. To Isherwood: “His greatest concerns, in the handful of major plays on which his reputation will last, were with the moral corruption brought on by bending one’s ideals to society’s dictates, buying into the values of a group when they conflict with the voice of personal conscience.” Dominik has laid out the conflict in Miller’s plays between working women and the men trying to create a better life for their families. “Like the wives and mothers in his plays, the women who work outside of the home often find themselves having to remain subservient, and continue to provide moral and emotional support to the very men who hold them down,” explains Dominik (24). Okawa believes the father and son conflicts set up the moral and ethical issues in many of Miller’s plays (100). Stanton points to the male vs. male and male vs. female conflicts. Leinster argues that part of Miller’s value as a playwright is the way he deconstructs the social order along the lines of what is moral and ethical (25).

Conclusion

The Crucible challenged similar political dynamics when Arthur Miller wrote the play as an analogy to the witch hunt for communism in the 1950s. Periodically, the play or a movie based on the play, deconstructs again the premise of societal institutions that good and evil are in a state of binary opposition and easy to identify.

Perhaps those who know the certainty of good and evil in the desire to create stability out of chaos should recall the warning of Cotton Mather (1692), a leading minister of Boston, during the witch trials. As Mather warned: "It is very certain that the devils have sometimes represented the shapes of persons not only innocent but also very virtuous..." (1692). Mather wanted to know how a person could know if Satan was disguised as good to condemn those who were the godliest. By 1692, Salem ended the witch trials because telling good from evil was a sorted business.

As stated in his writings, Miller wanted his audience to experience those "internal parallelisms" that he perceived as the connector between the Salem Witch Trials and the hunt for communists in the 1950s. His structure of good vs. evil keeps audiences returning to *The Crucible* when people want to figure out who are the devils and who are the virtuous in reality periodically filled with good and evil.

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