

Defending a Good Name

What are the top ten words to describe a good person? When attempting to describe this so-called “good person”, do the characteristics stubborn, disobedient, or unorthodox come to mind? They may for some people, but for most, those descriptions do not make the top ten. So where can one find a copy of the list to describe a good person? This question arose at the beginning of the *What is Good?* class at UIS in the Fall of 2014. With the help of psychoanalyst, Jacques Lacan, his seminar analyzing the character Antigone, from the play *Antigone* by Sophocles, and the application of his theories to John Proctor in *The Crucible* by Arthur Miller, the answer became clear.

The Crucible by Arthur Miller is a play about the Salem witch trials, a time when mass hysteria was prevalent and people were falsely accusing family members, friends, and neighbors to save themselves from being burned at the stake for witchcraft. The protagonist in the story is named John Proctor, and the play follows him and his family as they attempt to escape the tragedy of the witch trials. John Proctor’s wife, Elizabeth Proctor, is accused of witchcraft, and John tries to save her, but goes to jail himself and is sentenced to death. When John is given the opportunity to save himself by revealing the names of other practitioners of witchcraft, he cannot confess; it contradicts what he believes to be right, contrary to what the village believes. The main conflict in the play is between John Proctor and the people of Salem, particularly Judge Hathorne, who believe John should confess to witchcraft and divulge names. John Proctor’s individual desire is a definition of good, one that Lacan argues to be more powerful than society’s use of morals to frame the question of “the good”.

Morals have always been present to assist peoples’ consciences and help them decide how to be civil human beings in certain situations. It seems that these morals are “good” and

anything opposing them is classified as “bad”. Individual desire seems to have a negative connotation attached to it because of its close relationship to selfishness. The unspoken code of ethics that society seems to follow instructs people to be unselfish in order to be moral. However, Lacan seems to disagree with the notion of morals being the driving force of goodness in people. In his book, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan discusses the issue of defining what is right or what is good with regards to morals. He appears to disregard the use of morals altogether, telling his reader, “We are now in a position to be able to discuss the text of Antigone with a view to finding something other than a lesson in morality” (249). Instead of looking to ethics as an explanation of why humans behave the way they do, Lacan challenges his audience to try looking at, “[t]he beam of desire [that] is both reflected and refracted till it ends up giving us that most strange and profound of effects, which is the effect of beauty on desire” (248). Most times in controversial situations, morals are the entities praised for their clarification and guidance. Many individuals would be lost without their morals. But, what many people have never experienced is the power of personal passion and desire. As Lacan describes them, they are emotions which evoke a sense of awe and beauty. They are what motivate unique characters like Antigone and John Proctor to behave in ways that seem irrational and impulsive to people who are motivated by morals.

When there is a framework of ethics that applies to everyone, it is difficult to understand how individuals like Antigone and John Proctor can even exist. Lacan provides an explanation of the existence of such characters with this statement: “The good cannot reign over all without an excess emerging whose fatal consequences are revealed to us in tragedy” (259). To Lacan, it is inevitable that there will be individuals whom “the good”, which he calls those universal morals, cannot control. In other words, goodness is not the same for every person and unfortunately,

there are those who suffer when they reach the limit beyond which they cannot go. “The excess” that forms as a result are people like Antigone and John Proctor. These exclusive few encounter the ethics of desire at that limit, and they stick with that limit until their last breath, which Lacan argues is also inevitable.

Both Antigone and Proctor face fatal consequences for giving into their personal aspirations. Antigone longs to bury her brother, which is against the public edict. John Proctor yearns to keep his name and the names of his friends safe against the wishes of Judge Hathorne. Both choose to meet their death instead of obeying a totalitarian authority. An action like this is rare, and not many people would make the same decision Antigone and Proctor make. One could wonder if they are even human characters, giving up their lives so foolishly and acting so radically. And that is exactly the point Lacan wants to instill in his readers. Lacan illuminates us by saying, “[Antigone] is inhuman... We translate that as best we can by ‘inflexible’. It literally means something uncivilized, something raw” (263). Though a challenging idea to accept, Lacan is logical in using the term “inhuman” because Antigone’s behaviors are not inspired by normal, human rationale, but her own distinct logic.

John Proctor is very similar to Antigone in this respect. John Proctor can also be described as inhuman and inflexible. He is not so inclined to obey the authority in his town, which in *The Crucible*, is the Church and its officials. He is not exactly the perfect example of a Christian, which is what everyone in the town of Salem in 1692 is expected to be. When Proctor goes to court to try to free his wife from jail, he is suddenly questioned by Reverend Parris and Deputy Governor Danforth. Their questions are directed at determining the quality of Proctor’s Christianity. Reverend Parris discloses the fact that Proctor is, “Such a Christian that will not come to church but once in a month!” (90) And to this Proctor confesses, “I - I have no love for

Mr. Parris. It is no secret. But God I surely love” (90). Even though he does not physically attend church every Sunday, he considers himself a devoted Christian. It is not necessarily the designated rules of the Church Proctor follows, but his own instinctual rules concerning himself and his family. And, Proctor does not think Reverend Parris is worth being heard when he preaches, complaining, “ I have trouble enough without I come five mile to hear him preach only hellfire and bloody damnation” (28). Proctor does not want to spend his limited time listening to Parris talk about going to Hell because everyone is a sinner. Unfortunately, Parris is a man of God and anyone who opposes him, opposes the whole town. Another official of the court, Cheever, tells Danforth, “He plow on Sunday, sir” (90). According to Danforth and the Bible, “good” Christians rest on the Sabbath day and keep it holy by not working. Proctor, who has blatantly disobeyed this rule, justifies doing so with his reply, “I - I have once or twice plowed on Sunday. I have three children, sir, and until last year my land give little” (91). In truth, Proctor does not care that he has worked on Sundays because he knows he has to do it to provide for his family. Here, Proctor gives us a glimpse of his individual desire that drives his behaviors. He wants to protect his family because that is most important to him, more so than complying with the community’s rules. However, Danforth, being a figure of authority must uphold the religious laws of their town, and Proctor, being stubborn, disobeys these laws, and is punished.

Proctor is not the only imperfect Christian in the story. We find there are others who do not observe the laws of the community. A friend of Proctor’s, Giles Corey, voices, “You’ll find other Christians that do plow on Sunday if the truth be known” (91). So Proctor is not the only blasphemer in the town. However, he is still a one of a kind character in the play. His uniqueness can be explained by one of Lacan’s theories, which he calls “The limit of the second death” (260). So one may ask what is “the limit” and what is the “second death” and what do they have

to do with John Proctor. In attempting to explain this connection, it is best to start at defining “the limit”. When explaining this term, Lacan gives us the example of Antigone, writing, “One learns from Antigone’s own mouth testimony on the point she has reached: she literally cannot stand it anymore. Her life is not worth living. She lives with memory of the intolerable drama of the one whose descendance has just been destroyed in the figures of her two brothers. She lives in the house of Creon; she is subject to his law; and that is something she cannot bear” (263). That “point she has reached” is the limit. It is the point at which she is ready to die because she will not obediently acquiesce to what the supposed “sovereign law” of the land, which is Creon, has decreed. Creon, who represents the laws of morality, has crossed this limit (Lacan 259), the limit of the second death. Now, the “second death” term has to be explained, and to describe it, the idea of what Lacan calls “the signifier” has to be introduced. It can be defined as a term used to represent an object, but it is not the object itself; they are separate. In Antigone, Polynices, Antigone’s brother, physically dies, which is his first death. But there is another death he suffers, which is the second one and it is the death of his signifier. This is his name, his reputation and it dies because he cannot be buried or given last rites. Instead, he is labeled a traitor and his name is tarnished. This second death is what Antigone cannot stand, and what she gives her life up for.

The second death is what John Proctor has in common with Antigone. Towards the end of *The Crucible*, Proctor is given the opportunity to save himself from being hanged if he confesses to doing witchcraft and reveals the names of others dealing in witchcraft. After he is persuaded by Reverend Hale and Elizabeth to confess, he does. However, when he learns that his name, along with other confessors, will be posted on the door of the church, he argues that it does not need to be made public to the village. He cries, “Damn the village! I confess to God, and God has seen my name on this! It is enough! (142). He does not want his name to be

publicly tarnished as it will be after the people in Salem see it on the church door. He supports his reasoning for snatching up the confession and wanting to rip it up when he exclaims, “Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!” (143). His name is his signifier, the one that will live on even after a physical death. But if it is blemished, and others know him as “spoil[ing] their names” (141), (their meaning his friends and neighbors), he will perpetually be known as one who sold his friends to save himself. Judge Hathorne, like many of the other villagers in Salem, encourages Proctor to confess because it will save his life. But what Judge Hathorne is essentially doing is letting Proctor have his physical life, while condemning his second life, and therefore crossing the limit of the second death. It is a safe assumption that the majority of people would agree that a rational human would choose to confess and live their lives with their families. That is what the village of Salem will have everyone believe is moral. However, John cannot even understand that moral because he cannot stand the thought of leaving his name unworthy and broken. His soiled name will not only affect him, but also his children, and he pleads to Judge Hathorne, “I have three children-how may I teach them to walk like men in the world, and I sold my friends?” (143). It is his individual desire to give up his physical life so that he, his wife, and his children will not have the stigma of a traitor shadowing their lives. In this situation, Lacan might argue that Proctor’s desire to give up his life is not selfish, but rather selfless. Some may describe Proctor as impulsive, irrational, stubborn, and unorthodox, but his insistence on doing what is good according to his own desire is admirable. His insistence makes him a unique individual like Antigone, and one that defines his own sense of goodness.

The chief lesson to be learned while questioning the good, is that the questioning never ends. Goodness is not clearly defined anywhere. It is not black and white, but every shade between the two. Every person has a different opinion and a different perception of good, which makes it nearly impossible to pinpoint a list of what describes “good”. At the beginning, students in the *What is Good?* class would have only gone so far as to analyze John and Antigone as impulsive and selfish individuals, being too proud to want to live. After studying Lacan, most of the students understand their individual desires to define what is good in their lives, as opposed to looking at society’s morals. And it is to their credit to stand by their personal desires to guide them through life.

Works Cited

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