

## Societal Obligation versus Individual Morality

What is an individual's moral responsibility in the context of a corrupt society? Should German citizens have risked their lives to save Jewish neighbors during the Holocaust? What is your responsibility as an American regarding the extra-judicial detention of terror suspects at Guantanamo Bay? We will examine this fundamental issue through a close reading of several texts and a selection of writing prompts that follow. The first passage is from a blog written by Eric Albert:

Hannah Arndt was exactly right in 1963 when she had an epiphany while writing about Adolph Eichmann<sup>1</sup>, realizing in a profound moment of clarity that the great evils in the world are not the work of a few sociopaths, but are committed by ordinary people who accept what they are told by their government and then proceed to normalize whatever actions they might take.<sup>2</sup>

The second passage comes from Act Two of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. A knock at the door of John and Elizabeth Proctor brings Ezekiel Cheever. Accusations of witchcraft are afoot in Salem, and Cheever arrives bearing a warrant from the court for the arrest of Elizabeth Proctor. The accusation has been made by Abigail Williams, the young servant girl with whom John Proctor has recently concluded an illicit affair – an affair he has confessed to his wife, but of which no one else knows. Cheever, who in normal times works as a tailor, is a simple man who feels some trepidation in carrying out the mission that has brought him to the Proctor's, but he is also somewhat swelled with pride at his newly appointed status as a deputy of the Salem Court. Proctor is a proud and strong man, yet he feels deep shame at having violated his marriage vows. He sees now that his indiscretion may lead to his wife's death via Abigail's jealous and unjust accusation that has found credulous ears in a time when Salem's society is in the grip of irrational forces. Giles Corey is a friend of Proctor, Hale is a visiting minister expert in demonic arts who has been called to town to help with the investigation, and Mary Warren is the Proctor's new serving girl. Herrick is another officer of the court.

CHEEVER: Good evening to you, Proctor.

PROCTOR: Why, Mr. Cheever. Good evening.

CHEEVER: Good evening, all. Good evening, Mr. Hale.

PROCTOR: I hope you come not on business of the court.

CHEEVER: I do, Proctor, aye. I am clerk of the court now, y'know..

GILES: It's a pity, Ezekiel, that an honest tailor might have gone to Heaven must burn in Hell. You'll burn for this, do you know it?

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<sup>1</sup> Eichmann facilitated and managed the logistics of the mass deportation of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps in German-occupied Eastern Europe. He was captured by the Israeli Mossad in Buenos Aires, Argentina in 1960 and brought to trial in Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Albert, posted on <http://eric-albert.newsvine.com>

CHEEVER: You know yourself I must do as I'm told. You surely know that, Giles. And I'd as lief you'd not be sending me to Hell. I like not the sound of it, I tell you; I like not the sound of it. Now believe me, Proctor, how heavy be the law, all its tonnage I do carry on my back tonight. I have a warrant for your wife.

PROCTOR: You said she were not charged!

HALE: I know nothin' of it. When were she charged?

CHEEVER: I am given sixteen warrant tonight, sir, and she is one.

PROCTOR: Who charged her?

CHEEVER: Why, Abigail Williams charge her.

PROCTOR: On what proof, what proof?

CHEEVER: Mr. Proctor, I have little time. The court bid me search your house, but I like not to search a house. So will you hand me any poppets that your wife may keep here?

PROCTOR: Poppets?

ELIZABETH: never kept no poppets, not since I were a girl.

CHEEVER: I spy a poppet, Goody Proctor.

ELIZABETH: Oh! Why, this is Mary's.

CHEEVER: Would you please to give it to me?

ELIZABETH: Has the court discovered a text in poppets now?

CHEEVER: Do you keep any others in this house?

PROCTOR: No, nor this one either till tonight. What signifies a poppet?

CHEEVER: Why, a poppet, a poppet may signify-Now woman, will you please come with me?

PROCTOR: She will not! Fetch Mary here.

CHEEVER: No, no, I am forbid to leave her from my sight.

PROCTOR: You'll leave her out of sight and out of mind, Mister. Fetch Mary, Elizabeth.

HALE: What signifies a poppet, Mr. Cheever?

CHEEVER: Why, they say it may signify that she - Why, this, this -

PROCTOR: What's there?

CHEEVER: Why - it is a needle! Herrick, Herrick, it is a needle!

PROCTOR: And what signifies a needle!

CHEEVER: Why, this go hard with her, Proctor, this - I had my doubts, Proctor, I had my doubts, but here's calamity. You see it, sir, it is a needle!

HALE: Why? What meanin' has it?

CHEEVER: The girl, the Williams girl, Abigail Williams, sir. She sat to dinner in Reverend Parris's house tonight, and without word nor warnin' she falls to the floor. Like a struck beast, he says, and screamed a scream that a bull would weep to hear. And he goes to save her, and, stuck two inches in the flesh of her belly, he draw a needle out. And demandin' of her how she come to be so stabbed, she testify it were your wife's familiar spirit pushed it in.

PROCTOR: Why, she done it herself! I hope you're not takin' this for proof, Mister.

CHEEVER: 'Tis hard proof! I find her a poppet Goody Proctor keeps. I have found it, sir. And in the belly of the poppets needle's stuck. I tell you true, Proctor, I never warranted to see such proof of hell, and I bid you obstruct me not for I -

PROCTOR: Here now! Mary, how did this poppet come into my house?

MARY WARREN: What poppet's that, sir?

PROCTOR: This poppet, this poppet.

MARY WARREN: Why, I - I think it is mine.

PROCTOR: It is your poppet, is it not?

MARY WARREN: It - is, sir

PROCTOR: And how did it come into this house?

MARY WARREN: Why - I made it in the court, sir, and-give it to Goody Proctor tonight.

PROCTOR: Now, sir - do you have it?

HALE: Mary Warren, a needle have been found inside this poppet.

MARY WARREN: Why, I meant no harm by it, sir.

PROCTOR: You stuck that needle in yourself?  
 MARY WARREN: I-I believe I did, sir, I-  
 PROCTOR: What say you now?  
 HALE: Child, you are certain this be your natural memory? May it be, perhaps, that someone conjures you even now to say this?  
 MARY WARREN: Conjures me? Why, no, sir, I am entirely myself, I think. Let you ask Susanna Walcott- she saw me sewin' it in court. Ask Abby, Abby sat beside me when I made it.  
 PROCTOR: Bid him begone. Your mind is surely settled now. Bid him out, Mr. Hale.  
 ELIZABETH: What signifies a needle?  
 HALE: Mary – you charge a cold and cruel murder on Abigail.  
 MARY WARREN: Murder! I charge no –  
 HALE: Abigail were stabbed tonight; a needle were found stuck into her Belly –  
 ELIZABETH: And she charges me?  
 HALE: Aye.  
 ELIZABETH: Why –! The girl is murder! She must be ripped out of the world!  
 CHEEVER: You've heard that, sir! Ripped out of the world! Herrick, you Heard it!  
 PROCTOR: Out with you.  
 CHEEVER: Proctor, you dare not touch the warrant.  
 PROCTOR: Out with you  
 CHEEVER: You've ripped the Deputy Governor's warrant, man!  
 PROCTOR: Damn the Deputy Governor! Out of my house!  
 HALE: Now. Proctor, Proctor!  
 PROCTOR: Get y' gone with them. You are a broken minister.  
 HALE: Proctor, if she is innocent, the court –  
 PROCTOR: If she is innocent! Why do you never wonder if Paris be innocent, or Abigail? Is the accuser always holy now? Were they born this morning as clean as God's fingers? I'll tell you what's walking Salem – vengeance is walking Salem. We are what we always were in Salem, but now the little crazy children are jangling the keys of the kingdom, and common vengeance writes the law! This warrant's vengeance! I'll not give my wife to vengeance!  
 ELIZABETH: I'll go, John –  
 PROCTOR: You will not go!  
 HERRICK: I have nine men outside. You cannot keep her. The law binds me, John, I cannot budge.  
 PROCTOR: Will you see her taken?  
 HALE: Proctor, the court is just –  
 PROCTOR: Pontius Pilate! God will not let you wash your hands of this!  
 ELIZABETH: John – I think I must go with them. Mary, there is bread enough for the morning; you will bake, in the afternoon. Help Mr. Proctor as you were his daughter-you owe me that, and much more. When the children wake, speak nothing of witchcraft – it will frighten them.  
 PROCTOR: I will bring you home. I will bring you soon.  
 ELIZABETH: Oh, John, bring me soon!

The third passage is from an essay by Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau was arrested for failing to pay his poll tax by constable Samuel Staples in Concord, Massachusetts in July of 1846. Thoreau had deliberately refused to pay this tax to register his protest of the existence of legalized slavery in the United States and also America's prosecution of the war with Mexico. Thoreau's thoughts regarding his arrest, published in his essay "Civil Disobedience," have served as guiding lights in the worldwide struggle for human rights, influencing activists from Mahatma Ghandi to Martin Luther King. In the passage from the essay cited below, Thoreau specifically

examines the issue of whether or not an individual bears moral responsibility for serving as the agent of an unjust law:

My civil neighbor, the tax-gatherer, is the very man I have to deal with—for it is, after all, with men and not with parchment that I quarrel—and he has voluntarily chosen to be an agent of the government. How shall he ever know well what he is and does as an officer of the government, or as a man, until he is obliged to consider whether he will treat me, his neighbor, for whom he has respect, as a neighbor and well-disposed man, or as a maniac and disturber of the peace, and see if he can get over this obstruction to his neighborliness without a ruder and more impetuous thought or speech corresponding with his action.

### **Written Response**

In a written statement of 150 to 200 words, respond to the question that begins this activity: What is an individual's moral responsibility in the context of a corrupt society? In responding to the question, integrate quotes from at least two of the three sources into your own words.

### **Discussion Questions**

- What is each of these three writers saying about the moral responsibility of an individual who is placed by circumstance in an ethically dubious situation?
- Do you agree or disagree with Hannah Arndt when she says, "The great evils in the world are not the work of a few sociopaths, but are committed by ordinary people who accept what they are told by their government"? Besides Nazi Germany, what other examples can you think of that would relate to her observation?
- What does Thoreau mean when he says, "It is [...] with men and not with parchment that I quarrel"? Is Samuel Staples to blame for Thoreau's imprisonment? Is Samuel Staples to blame for slavery or the Mexican War?

### **Writing Prompts – choose one of the following to complete in class**

1. Write an opening statement for a lawyer prosecuting Thoreau for his failure to pay taxes. Imagine that lawyer is himself sympathetic to the abolitionist cause.
2. Write a letter in the voice of Ezekiel Cheever addressed to Giles Corey and explaining why Cheever doesn't believe he will be going to Hell, as Corey had suggested.
3. Write a dialogue (following the format of the excerpt from the play) in which Proctor finds Cheever alone in an alley outside of a tavern later on that night. Have each character speak at least three times. Feel free to include narration of any events that surround their discussion.
4. Write a speech you would deliver at a rally held to support the closing of the Guantanamo Bay detention center taking as its subject/theme the following quote from Civil Disobedience: "Under a government which imprisons any unjustly the true place for a just man is also a prison."