

# An Analysis of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* from Rene Girard's Scapegoat Theory

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## Abstract:

*The Crucible*, a representative work of Arthur Miller, the American Jewish playwright, is based on Massachusetts Salem witch case in American colonial times. Through the scapegoating mechanism and four paradigms of persecution texts proposed by René Girard, this paper reveals that *The Crucible* is a modern persecution text. By analyzing the specific manifestations of these four types of paradigms in this work, this paper interprets the victim's scapegoat's identity from different aspects, aiming to explore the recurrence mode of the scapegoat mechanism in the field of contemporary literature, and its deep reasons behind the incident.

**Keywords:** Scapegoating mechanism, Four types of paradigms, Persecution text

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is one of the most marvelous playwrights in the field of American drama. Miller's plays show his strong sense of social responsibility and humanistic care, hence he is known as a social dramatist and is hailed as "the conscience of American drama" [1]. *The Crucible* is one of his representative plays premiered in 1953. It is a four-act play that Miller adapted from a real event happened in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. The Salem Witch Hunt of 1692 is one of the most controversial topics in American history research. In the interpretation of later works, the significance of Salem Witch Hunt as an event is not static in the past, but constantly generated, transformed and returned. Through the historical drama *The Crucible*, Miller transforms the collective madness of this ancient village into a dramatic historical narrative, and completes a series of creations and changes within history in the form of literary events. Foreign research on Miller has begun in the late 1940s and domestic research has started in the 1980s. Up to now, the researches on his representative work *The Crucible* focus on such topics as the intertextuality between the script and historical events, the ethical and moral issues, the tragic nature, the gender issues, the relationship between the individual and the society and so on. Among them, the scapegoat image has rarely been studied. On the basis of previous studies, the thesis intends to explore the scapegoat image and the reasons behind it.

The "Scapegoat" is defined as an "individual, group or country singled out for unmerited negative treatment or blame" in modern usage. Scapegoat, as a culture phenomenon, deeply rooted in human

civilization. The scapegoat has long-standing and well-established in various nations' cultures. The forms of scapegoat are also different in various cultural backgrounds. As early as the ancient Greece, there existed such a storm like this: when people suffer a natural disaster such as an invasion or a calendrical crisis, such as the end of a year in the community, a plague or a famine, they had to take actions in response to these conditions, the community will always cast out the weak people, like a beggar, a cripple or a criminal and many other vulnerable ones. With the development of the researches on scapegoat, this cultural phenomenon has been gradually theorized, systemized and widely applied into the critics of literary works. At present, the most systematic and typical research on scapegoat is carried out by the famous French anthropologist and literary critic Rene Girard.

The theory of scapegoat, put forward by Rene Girard, refers to that when a social and cultural crisis appears, members of the society believe that the disaster is happening because people are guilty. Therefore, they will find victims to bear all the guilt, and this is the "scapegoat". When he is persecuted, the disaster subsides and society returns to normal. The "scapegoat" should be sanctified, and people feel it is all due to it. In Scapegoat, Girard pointed out that persecution texts can generally have the following types of paradigms: a description of a social and cultural crisis; accusations on the subject's crime; peculiar marks of the suspects; the violence of mass persecution itself. The author believes that these four types of paradigms are embodied in the play *The Crucible*, so the play constitutes a modern text of persecution. The play outlines the victims scapegoat identity from different aspects, and its redemptive role is to expose evil, face up to history, and praise people's integrity and no such tragedy occurs again.

## II. CRISIS AND ACCUSATION

A state of crisis, or a less differentiated and collapsed state of culture is recognized logically and chronologically as the first stereotype of persecution. The cause of the crisis may be external, such as an epidemic, a severe drought or a flood followed by famine, or internal, like political disturbances or religious conflicts. No matter what causes the crisis, the scale of the crisis or disaster will be big enough to make people feel panic and anxious. Thus, everything is reduced to an extreme confusion.

*The Crucible* is based on the Witch-hunt case that occurred in Salem, Massachusetts, at the end of February 1692. At the beginning of the play, several girls from Salem are frightened and fall in a coma. These frightened girls include Reverend Parris' daughter and Mrs. Putnam's daughter Ruth. They send for Doctor Griggs, but he "cannot discover no medicine for it in his books" [2]. Soon there is a rumor spreading that there is witchcraft around the town. Parris knows what causes Betty and Ruth in such a state. The truth is that his daughter, Betty, his niece, Abigail, and other girls dance in the forest. When they are dancing, Parris leaps in on them, and they take fright. However, Parris is unwilling to tell the truth to the people in the town, because he is afraid of being driven out of Salem for such corruption in his house. At the instigation of Thomas Putnam, "Let you take hold here. Wait for no one to charge you-declare it yourself. You have discovered witchcraft" [3], Parris invites Mr. Hale to investigate the town. As a result, rumors spread around the town of Salem, people are panicking, and a fear from the bottom of the heart makes the town of Salem under the shadow of witch hunt.

The second stereotype is the accusations of the troublemaker's crimes. Crisis finally led to the collapse of interpersonal relationships and at this time, "rather than blame themselves, people inevitably blame either society as a whole, which cost them nothing, or other people who seem particularly harmful for easily identifiable reasons" [4]. Therefore, in most persecution texts, there are three common accusations of the trouble maker - violent crimes, sexual crimes and religious crimes. "Ultimately, the persecutors always convince themselves that a small number of people, or even a single individual, despite his relative weakness, is extremely harmful to the whole of society" [5].

Facing the chaos in Salam, Reverend Parris invites Reverend Hale of Beverly to chase witches. The girls who danced at woods are afraid of being treated as witches, thus they say that they see many people staying with the Devil. When Abigail is interrogated, to whiten her reputation, she first frames the female nigger Tituba as a tool of the devil. To escape being hanged, Tituba confesses to witchcraft and charges Sarah Good and Goody Osburn. Betty also accuses innocent neighbors. Then the group of girls follow Abigail to play "pretense" and frame others. Villagers also accuse each other. Mrs. Putnam gives birth to eight children and only one child survives. Rebecca is charged with "For the marvelous and supernatural murder of Goody Putman's babies" [6]. Old Giles is in his early eighties and is the most comical hero in the village. Giles's wife, Martha, loves to read, but she always reads secretly at night. He once reveals this fact to other people in the village. She is accused of bewitching Walcott's pigs with her books. Later, many people are framed. Abigail has adultery with John Proctor. She intends to take this chance to kill Elizabeth Proctor and replace her position. Abigail charges Elizabeth with a cold and cruel murder on her. John Proctor determines to tell the truth about the adultery with Abigail to stop her conspiracy but he fails. He brings Mary Warren, the maid of the Proctors, to the court as a witness. Mary tells what she knows out of her conscience that those girls are framing others and all they said in court are lies. However, under the intimidation of the deputy governor Danforth, other judges, Parris and Abigail, she retracts the earlier testimony, leading to the result that Proctor is accused of working for the Devil.

### **III. SPECIAL MARKS ON THE VICTIMS**

The crowd's choice of victims may be totally ransom. "It is even possible that the crimes of which they are accused are real, but that sometimes the persecutors choose their victims because they belong to a class that is particular susceptible to persecution rather than because of the crimes they committed" [7]. That's to say, "the victims are chosen not for the victims they are accused of but for the victim's signs that they bear, for everything that suggests their guilty relationship with the crisis" [8]. In the process of choosing victim, the one with special marks would likely be picked out. "Ethnic and religious minorities tend to polarize the majorities against themselves. In this we see one of the criteria by which victims are selected, which though relative to the individual society, is transcultural in principle" [9].

The victims have their special marks. The first accused person is Tituba. Tituba is a black maid who serves in the house of the minister Parris, and the black color of her skin is the root cause of her accusation. Tituba belongs to "ethnic minority". The race leads to Tituba being groundlessly accused and she is

subjected to racial accusation from most of the people around her, such as Parrs, Mrs. Putnam, Abigail and other girls. Parrs screams at Tituba to get out and takes his anger out on Tituba simply because Tituba wants to see Betty. Mrs. Putnam also charges Tituba. She wonders how her children die, so she sends Ruth to seek Tituba for help because Tituba knows how to talk to the dead. Even though she knows it is a formidable sin to conjure up the dead in Salem. She deliberately frames Tituba dues to her skin. Besides, Abigail and other girls, accuses Tituba of conjuring up the spirits of Ruth's dead sisters. As a result, the trouble in the house even in the whole town eventually "lands on her back" [10]. She is accused of trucking with Devil and enlisting children with Devil.

Then, Sarah Good and Goody Osburn are accused of witching these children. Sarah Good sleeps in ditches, and very old and poor. Goody Osburn is drunk and half-witted. Based on Girard, these poor people living at the bottom of society are on the margins of society, or marginal outer. "The further one is from normal social status of whatever kind, the greater the risk of persecution. This is easy to see in relation to those at the bottom of the social ladder." [11] Both Sarah Good and Goody Osburn are poor and outsiders. The aging body and in poor condition are the cause of their accusation. Aging is a necessary stage for human beings and an aging body is just a normal external representation. However, once concerned with witchcraft, the aging body is the most obvious feature to distinguish the normal and the witches. The aging body is the most distinct feature both in Sarah Good and Goody Osburn. They are both near 60 years old. Meanwhile, "older women who are unable to support themselves are more likely to be suspected of witchcraft" [12]. These two old women become the target of persecution.

Besides the marginal outsider, there is another group of people, who belong to the marginal insider. The marginal insider are rich and powerful people. "In normal times the rich and powerful enjoy all sorts of protection and privileges which the disinherited lack" [13]. But in times of crisis, they are subjected to the acts of violence. Rebecca, Elizabeth and Martha Giles belong to the marginal insiders. Rebecca is the wife of Francis Nurse, who is a prestigious person and is regarded as an unofficial judge in town. As his wealth and social status grow, the Putnam clan resents his rise. Although Thomas Putnam is a very large landowner with extended families behind him, he is not respected like Francis. The fight for land and ministry between the two families is the trigger for Rebecca's accusation. The Putnams wants to bring down the Nurses, annexing the disputed land and getting the ministry. Therefore, the Putnams plan to strike at Rebecca. Mr. Putnam's youngest daughter Ruth collapses at the hearing so that Putnam accuses Rebecca of hurting her with witchcraft. Moreover, Edward and Jonathan Putnam sign the complaint against Rebecca. It is certain that he guiding hand behind the outcry was Thomas Putnam's.

Rebecca's fecundity also leads to an outburst of jealousy from Mr. Putnam. The feeling of jealousy is one of the reasons of Rebecca's accusation. Rebecca has eleven children and twenty-six grandchildren and they are all on the family estate. However, Mrs. Putnam's seven children die on the night of their birth and her only daughter collapses for no apparent reason. Hence, she envies Rebecca for having so many healthy children. Jealousy plays a critical role in the witchcraft accusation. As a result, Mrs. Putnam, jealous of Rebecca, accuses her as a wicked witch and charges that Rebecca murders her seven newborn babies with witchcraft.

Proctor's special marks are multiple, "the more signs of a victim an individual bears, the more likely he is to attract disaster" [14]. Proctor's accusation comes from disobedience of religious creeds. For Christians, they should adhere to religious creed. On Sundays and major religious festivals, believers must go to the church. But Proctor rarely goes to church on Sabbath Day, and he goes to church in twenty-six time in seventeen months. Proctor has three sons, but only two are baptized. What's more, Proctor violates the seventh of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt not commit adultery", and Proctor commits adultery with Abigail. That is to say, he commits a sexual crime. Proctor does not abide by religious doctrines, which leads to his anti-Christian accusation.

Proctor himself is a pious Christian and he has never been a partisan of any faction in the town. Moreover, he always behaves himself and does something beneficial to the church. Proctor is a covenanted Christian in the eyes of the Salem people. Therefore, nearly thirty people come to hear and speak discontent when Parris summons the congregation for John Proctor's excommunication. Such a devoted man is accused as an anti-Christian person and bears the crime of blasphemy and becomes a scapegoat who doomed to sacrifice for society.

When his wife is arrested for being framed by Abigail, Proctor damns the court and rips the Deputy Governor's warrant, directly provoking the authorities. Facing the judge in court, he vows to expose the girls' lies in public. He brings Mary Warren to the court as a witness. Mary states that: "It were pretence, sir" [15]. By admitting adultery, he has made a hell of his honor and has rung the doom of his good name. Through such exposure, he hopes the judges would recognize Abigail's evil nature and that the whole affair is a hoax. In the face of the law enforcement's obsession, he goes crazy, and calls for the Satan to burn the raging fire. Proctor is imprisoned and Danforth forces him to confess his crime and offer the names of other people with Devil. Nevertheless, Proctor cannot give up his own conscience for the sake of humiliating survival by betraying his friends and selling his soul. He tears the confession angrily.

#### **IV. THE SIEGE OF COLLECTIVE PERSECUTION**

The last stereotype is the violence itself, which is the collective persecutions towards the victim. In Girard's view, the crowd always tend to persecute and the persecutors are always eager to abreact their extreme hatred through violence. Collective persecutors spare no effort to incite the crowd to persecute the victim. Collective persecutors do their utmost to make the crowd believe that the victim is the root cause of the crisis, worsening of relations, intension and revenge. Only when this black sheep is removed, can the community relieve the heavy load and regain compromise. "the import of the operation is to lay the responsibility for the crisis on the victims and to exert an influence on it by destroying these victims or at least by banishing them from the community they 'pollute' [16]."

The victims are arrested, put into prison and dungeon. The prison is packed and full of prodigious stench. The victims receive physical torment there. Those who do not confess their guilt with the Devil are to be hanged. Twelve victims have been hanged. The other seven people are to be hanged, and their names have been given out, and the people in the village expect to see them die this morning. The play doesn't

show any outright violence, just a sentence or two about the execution. Proctor, Rebecca and others are hanged, there is no direct presentation of the process of hanging, but only a side view. “The final drumroll crashes, then heightens violently. [...] and the drums rattle like bones in the morning air” [17]. Besides the way of hanging, there is also kind of punishment: kill people to death by putting stones on them. Elizabeth uses one sentence to describe how James is crushed to death with stones, “Great stones they lay upon his chest until he plead aye or nay. [...] And died” [18].

## V. THE REDEMPTIVE MEANING OF SCAPEGOAT

The Salam witch hunt of 1692 is not the whim of a few townspeople or judges, or simply because Salam is more savage and crazier than his contemporaries in the West, but “the Salam witch-hunt is deeply rooted in the history of witch trials in Europe and New England at the end of the seventeenth world” [19]. People have deep-rooted fear toward witch-hunt. “Between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries, as many as one million individuals in Europe were executed for the crime of witchcraft. The majority of the trials and executions took place during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries” [20]. Most of the executed witches were women, “From the early decades of the 14th century until 1650, continental Europeans executed between 200,000 and 500,00 witches, 85% or more of whom were women” [21]. For those living in Western Europe and New England in the seventeenth century, the existence of witchcraft and the punishment of witches are common-sense truths. The source is from the *Old Testament*. In the book of *Exodus*, “the woman who practiced witchcraft shall not be allowed to live”. The witch-hunt has a long history and people have deep-rooted fear toward it.

Since the scapegoat mechanism exists and operates in persecution texts and keep running throughout human being’s history for so long a time, its engine and power must have deep root in human beings. This could be explained by Girard’s theory of mimetic desire. Desire is different from need which may be satisfied by a piece of cheese or a glass of wine. It is something that people admire and spare no effort to get. Girard believes that human beings are never the source of their own desires. they usually get hints and borrow desires from a model, who at the same time is their rival in realizing the desires. People only want to get the things that others want or possess. The subject of desire acquires a certain desire with the inspiration of mediator, but he is blocked by the mediator when he wants to get the object because the mediator owns the object or is closer to the object to some extent. So there exist a competition relationship between the subject and mediator. Then “the subject is torn between two opposite feelings toward his model—the most submissive reverence and the most intense malice. This is the passion we call hatred” [22].

This kind of hatred resulted in persecution. The witch-hunt in Salem is caused by the mimetic desire. One case is land-lust. Land-lust is expressed before by constant bickering over boundaries and deeds. Francis Nurse and Rebecca have three hundred acres and eleven children. Putnam is in the land war against his neighbors and he has only child survived. Putnam envies Rebecca’s land and children. Mr. Putnam takes this opportunity to retaliate against them and seize their land and properties. In order to seize the best land in the village, he plans a campaign against Rebecca and Francis. He cheats his young

daughter collapse into a convulsion on the spot during the trial, and then charged innocent villagers. To seize neighbor's property, he encourages his daughter to falsely accuse George. Jacob and Martha Cowley. Abigail envies Elizabeth, and intends to replace her. Long-held hatreds of neighbors could now be openly expressed, and vengeance taken. One could cry witch against one's neighbor and feel perfectly justified in the bargain. "Vengeance is walking Salem" [23]. Witch is a cover to acquire what they desired.

Another reason for Salem witch-hunt is that the people of Salem develop a theocracy, a combine of state and religious power whose function is to keep the community together, and to prevent any kind of disunity that might open it to destruction by material or ideological enemies. Under the authority of this combination of church and state, "people who have a slight resistance to the existing system are almost forced to pass their sins on to accuse or demonize others" [24].

Whatever the outcome of the struggle, its spirit brings comfort and hope to those in disaster. When Proctor and other persons walk toward the scaffold, "the new sun is pouring in [...], and the drums rattle like bones in the morning air" [25]. The play not only reflects the evil of the society, the darkness of human nature and the struggle of the scapegoat, but also show Miller's strong sense of social issues and lofty humanistic care.

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