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## Miller's *The Crucible*: The Salem Witch Trials as a Black Swan

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### Abstract

This paper uses Nassim Nicholas Taleb's theory of the Black Swan as propounded by Taleb in his book *The Black Swan* and applies it to the Salem Witch Trials as portrayed by Arthur Miller in his play *The Crucible*. Taleb uses this theory to mainly analyse what he calls Black Swan events in financial markets, stating, however, that almost every major event in this world is a Black Swan. This paper proposes to read the Salem Witch Trials of 1692 as shown by Miller in his play using the principles that Taleb outlines to identify a Black Swan. The paper, however, focuses not simply on the Witch Trials as an isolated historical occurrence but rather on its later cultural and social repercussions, a side of which is witnessed in Miller's use of it, almost two and a half centuries later as the subject of his play.

**Keywords:** Black Swan, Salem Witch Trials, Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Arthur Miller, McCarthyism

### Introduction

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,  
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy"

– *Hamlet*, I. v, William Shakespeare.

*The Crucible*, first performed on January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1953, is a dramatisation of the Salem witch trials that took place in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692. Miller notes at the very beginning of the play-text-

"This play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian."

For dramatic purposes, he writes, he has "fused many characters into one" but the "fate of each character is exactly that of his historical model". He further adds that "the characters of the persons...may therefore be taken as creations of my own, drawn to the best of my ability in conformity with their known behaviour..."

In *The Crucible*, then, Miller treats a historical subject dramatically. He modifies facts where necessary to suit the constraints of the stage and more importantly, to represent his own ideology. This paper proposes to show the Salem witch trials as represented by Miller in *The Crucible* as, what Nassim Nicholas Taleb calls, a Black Swan.

Taleb writes in his book *The Black Swan*-

"What we call here a Black Swan (and capitalize it) is an event with the following three attributes.

First, it is an *outlier*, as it lies outside the realm of regular expectations, because nothing in the past can convincingly point to its possibility. Second, it carries an extreme impact. Third, in spite of its outlier status, human nature makes us concoct explanations for its occurrence *after* the fact, making it explainable and predictable.

I stop and summarize the triplet: rarity, extreme impact, and retrospective (though not prospective) predictability."

The play has, in addition to stage directions, long pieces of narration in the beginning, and sometimes even in the middle, of scenes. These narrations serve not as stage directions but as important pieces of background information intermingled with Miller's own social commentary. It thus does the reader ill to call these lengthy narrations simply stage directions, for they are most certainly much more. They are variously included or excluded in stage performances. This paper, in dealing extensively with these narrations, shall then consider *The Crucible* as a play in text and not in performance.

In the first of these narrations, at the beginning of Act I, the reader is introduced to Reverend Parris whose daughter Betty, aged ten, is lying unconscious on the bed. About the Reverend,

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The reader is told-

“He was a widower with no interest in children, or talent with them. He regarded them as young adults, and until this strange crisis he, like the rest of Salem, never conceived that the children were anything but thankful for being permitted to walk straight, eyes slightly lowered, arms at the sides, and mouths shut until bidden to speak.”

These are the same children whose false evidence and arbitrary crying out against women whom they dislike or want to avenge (as is the case of Abigail who wishes for Elizabeth Proctor to be hanged in order to continue her own affair with Elizabeth’s husband, John Proctor) leads to the arrest and consequent hanging of innocent men and women. Their only motive, at least in the play, is to save themselves from the wrath of the law and of the community for the things that they have indeed done in the forest.

Miller in his narration at the start of Act One states how the Salem folk believed that the vast wilderness of the American continent which stretched endlessly to the west was a space “antagonistic to man” and the Devil’s “home base and citadel”. Miller also calls this witch hunt a “perverse manifestation of the panic which set in among all classes when the balance began to turn toward greater individual freedom.” People of Salem, the god-fearing, land-holding ones at any rate, became obsessed with hurling accusations at random people whose lands they wanted to amass or anyone that they wanted to settle old scores with. One such person would be Thomas Putnam who wishes to own Giles Corey’s tract of land in the forest. He gets the girls to accuse Corey’s wife, later hanged because of the accusation, of witchcraft. In trying to defend his wife, Giles too is accused of the same and as Elizabeth tells John in Act Four-

"He were not hanged. He would not answer yes or no to his indictment; for if he denied the charge they'd hang him surely, and auction out his property. So he stands mute, and died Christian under the law. And so his sons will have his farm. It is the law, for he could not be condemned a wizard without he answer the indictment, aye or nay."

He dies, trying to protect his land, pressed by stones.

Much later, on August 30, 1890, W.S. Nevins wrote in *Salem Observer*-

“The terrible witchcraft delusion in Salem in 1692 was caused almost entirely by children. But for a half-dozen young girls, those men and women would not have been hung on Gallows Hill. . . .”<sup>[1]</sup>

In sixteenth-century Europe, older children sometimes comprised a special category of witch hunters bringing accusations of witchcraft against adults. Child witch hunters sometimes accused their family members of being witches. The most renowned trials caused by child accusations, however, occurred in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692<sup>[2]</sup>. Children were viewed as having an important role in convicting witches, due to their being able to identify people impulsively. Children who made such false allegations often directed them at adults with whom they had strained relationships, such as teachers or Puritanical neighbours.

Playing on people’s fear of the unknown space of the forest, of the unknown world of the Devil and on their jealous love for land and petty neighbourhood discontent, these children single-handedly cause the dishonour and death of several hundred innocent men and women. That children, at least in the strongly Puritan adult world of Salem, can cause such chaos was unheard of. By Act Four, they are no longer “the voice of Heaven...speaking through the children”, they stand

for, as Reverend Hale says, “the harlots’ cry”.

In this sense then, the witch trial as portrayed in *The Crucible* is an *outlier*, as it lies outside the realm of how society thinks about children and because nothing in the past, not even the trials in Europe, could have convincingly pointed to its possibility.

In Act Four, the Deputy Governor, Thomas Danforth says-

“Postponement now speaks a floundering on my part... While I speak God’s law... I should hang ten thousand that dared to rise against the law, and an ocean of salt tears could not melt the resolution of the statutes. Now draw yourselves up like men and help me, as you are bound by Heaven to do.”

The trial and executions have, by now, become less a matter of the Church culling “a resurgence of the Dionysiac forces it had crushed long before” and protecting the community from witchcraft and more a matter of upholding personal ideas of justice, of self-worth and of masculinity.

Reverend Hale tells Danforth-

“Excellency, there are orphans wandering from house to house; abandoned cattle bellow on the highroads, the stink of rotting crops hangs everywhere, and no man knows when the harlots’ cry will end his life - and you wonder yet if rebellion’s spoke? Better you should marvel how they do not burn your province!”

Reverend Parris presents further reports of a rebellion already taking place in Andover, a neighbouring colony, where people have “thrown out the court...and will have no part of witchcraft.” In Salem moreover, he says, -

“There be a faction here, feeding on that news, and I tell you true, sir, I fear there will be riot here.”

In ‘Echoes Down The Corridor’, written as a sort of epilogue to the play, Miller states -

“To all intents and purposes, the power of theocracy in Massachusetts was broken” (127),

as Arthur Redding observed that Miller believed McCarthyism will eventually become “a distant and dimly remembered dream”<sup>[3]</sup>.

The historian George Lincoln Burr later wrote-

“More than once it has been said, too, that the Salem witchcraft was the rock on which the theocracy shattered”<sup>[4]</sup>.

The extreme impact of this trial can then be seen in the fact that it resulted in the overthrow of the theocracy in Massachusetts. The other extreme impact would be the number of wrongful convictions, imprisonments and deaths it caused- 19 people and 2 dogs were executed on Gallows Hill, a 71-year-old man [Giles Corey] was pressed to death with heavy stones, several people died in jail and nearly 200 people, overall, had been accused<sup>[5]</sup>.

The fear of communism in the United States was a manifestation of political anxiety over the infiltration of international influences, namely tied to Soviet Russia, during the 20th century. The basis of this fear was based on the significant differences between capitalism and communism as economic systems. One noteworthy example of the manifestation of this fear was McCarthyism in the 1950s.

Joseph McCarthy was the U.S. senator from Wisconsin who led the effort to expose and purge domestic communists throughout the 1950s. McCarthy claimed that there were known communists working to subvert the U.S. government from within. As a result, suspected communists, including members of the American political left and the entertainment industries, had their names blacklisted, thus barring them from many work opportunities and restricting certain civil liberties such as freedom of speech. The paranoia generated

by McCarthyism had significant effects on the social and political landscape of America. In addition to the communist political party being decimated, other left-wing and moderate political organizations were restricted from reforming or even criticizing McCarthy's anti-communist tactics because of the fear of being deemed unpatriotic or even disloyal to the United States.

Miller wrote *The Crucible* against this background. Miller himself was questioned by the House of Representatives' Committee on Un-American Activities and convicted of "contempt of Congress" for refusing to identify others present at Communist meetings he had attended. The Salem witch trials of 1692, in *The Crucible*, then become an allegory for McCarthyism of the 1950s.

In allaying the paranoia which resulted in the kind of convictions that were termed McCarthyism in the 1950s to the psychology behind the trials of 1692, Miller produces a kind of explanation for the trials <sup>[6]</sup>. In his lengthy explicative intermittent narrations, he reiterates circumstances as they stood, which he sees as being responsible for the witch hunt.

He writes-

"The witch-hunt was a perverse manifestation of the panic which set in among all classes when the balance began to turn toward greater individual freedom"

Moreover,

"The witch-hunt was not, however, a mere repression. It was also, and as importantly, a long overdue opportunity for every-one so inclined to express publicly his guilt and sins, under the cover of accusations against the victims."

Miller highlights events which, in retrospect, appear to have been important in terms of causality. In doing so then, he is, in spite of the trials' outlier status, concocting explanations for its occurrence *after* it has occurred, making it explainable and predictable.

The Salem witch trials as presented by Miller in *The Crucible* thus conform to the three essential properties of a Black Swan- rarity, extreme impact, and retrospective predictability. In so doing, it establishes itself as a Black Swan which in taking shape from the realm of the unexpected not only shaped American history but also captured the imaginations of people, like Miller, who still portray it in narrative, which in itself is an act of retrospection.

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