

Acting Out of Fear: Is Anyone Safe?

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In *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism and American Culture*, Thomas Doherty profiles the 1950's Red Scare, also known as McCarthyism, and its vast effect on American culture during that time. Doherty arms his audience with the revealing history behind the rise and fall of Senator Joe McCarthy, as well as the roots of the anti-communist attitude during the Cold War era that led to the rise of McCarthyism. He discusses the effects of McCarthyism on the entertainment world of the 1950's; the blacklisting of actors, actresses, and producers; many important trials, such as the Army-McCarthy Hearings; and, finally, the end of McCarthyism. An interesting section of the book titled *I Love Lucy: The Redhead and the Blacklist* demonstrates that in a time of fear and political and religious upheaval, such as the anti-Communist movement or the Salem witch trials, anyone can become a suspect, no matter his reputation, stature, or public adoration. During the Salem witch-hunts, many knowledgeable, outspoken persons—usually women—were accused of witchcraft. As in *The Crucible*, most were accused on other premises, such as dislike, jealousy, or unsettled disputes. Similarly, during the period of McCarthyism, anyone in contact or sympathizing with a suspected communist was blacklisted, lost his job, or was arrested.

Such is the case with the actress Lucille Ball most known for the hit *I Love Lucy* and perhaps "the most beloved and profitable performer of the 1950's" (Doherty 49). In September 1953, during the height of the *I Love Lucy* show, it was announced in the media that Lucille Ball was a member of the very party threatening the American way of life, the Communist party. Not

only was she supposedly a member, but she was also accused of hosting communist meetings at her home and allegedly holding a spot on the Central Committee for the California Communist Party. Two days prior to the release of such shocking information, however, Ball testified at a House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) session. During her testimony, she explained that in 1936, seventeen years earlier, at a time when registering as a communist was not looked upon as treason, Ball, her mother, and her brother all registered with the Communist party in an effort to appease her grandfather. During all the controversy surrounding Ball's political views, her network, sponsor, and a public composed of "all the usual suspects, ordinarily so willing to fold under pressure and toss a controversial personality overboard-lined up behind the beleaguered star" (Doherty 56). Also, CBS was flooded with mail from supporters of Ball. One week later, HUAC member Donald Jackson cleared Ball's name, announcing that he was confident she had never been an active member of the Communist Party. The investigation of America's primetime sweetheart illustrates that no one was safe from the anti-Communist movement.

Similarly, in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, Rebecca Nurse, a revered woman in the community, was accused of witchcraft during the Salem witch-hunts. Through his characterization of her, Miller implies that Rebecca was a benevolent, knowledgeable, God-fearing woman. He clearly makes the point that "the general opinion of her character was so high," (Miller 2066) that it was inconceivable how anyone could accuse her of witchcraft. Miller conveys this through having Mr. Hale tell Rebecca, "I suppose you look as such a good soul should. We have all heard of your great charities in Beverly" (Miller 2071); Miller's own expository throughout the play places further emphasis upon her good character. To justify her predicament, however, Miller offers the explanation that the Putnams used the mass hysteria

surrounding the possibility of witchcraft in Salem to their advantage and accused Rebecca, not because she was a witch, but because of both a long-standing political dispute and a land feud between the Nurses and the Putnams. Despite Rebecca's reputation and the public's admiration for her, she was jailed for her unwillingness to admit to being a witch and for the murder of Mrs. Putnam's children. As with Lucille Ball, the townsfolk stood behind Rebecca, with ninety-one people signing a testament declaring "their good opinion of Rebecca" (Miller 2099) and others falsely accused. Unfortunately, Rebecca Nurse was hanged for Witchcraft, an act Miller clearly contributes to the crazed state and unclear minds of those in Salem. Miller compares the out-of-control situation of 1692 Salem, Massachusetts, to the situation of McCarthyism in the 1950's.

As illustrated, both Rebecca Nurse and Lucille Ball were highly revered members of the community affected by current states of fear, due to the witch trials and Communism, respectively. The public stood behind both women, attesting to their good names. Unfortunately, Rebecca was put to death by a court that was overshadowed by hysteria. On the other hand, Ball was cleared. The tribulations of these women show just how far fear will allow people to push the limitations of right and wrong.

Works Cited

- Doherty, Thomas. *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2003.
- Miller, Arthur. "The Crucible." *Heath Anthology of American Literature*. Volume C: *Late Nineteenth Century* 1865-1910. 5th ed. Ed. Paul Lauter. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. 2053-2126.

Ms. Acosta's Comments: *Natasha is both a sophisticated writer and complex thinker. She went above and beyond the simple requirements of this assignment to create a thought-provoking essay. I also appreciate her careful source documentation.*