



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Mary McCarthy: The Novelist

Niraj Kumar

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Jai Prakash University, Chapra.

Article History: Submitted-21/07/2019, Revised-30/08/2019, Accepted-04/09/2019, Published-10/09/2019.

Abstract:

Mary McCarthy (1912-1989), a reputed American woman novelist, role model, was byword to the college-educated intellectuals of mid 1960s of the United States of America. She was a brilliant and versatile writer—novelist, short stories writer, essayist, and above all a reporter. Apart from this, she was a formidable theatre critic. Her books on Venice and Florence are prized by travellers. She won The National Medal for Literature and Edward Mac Dowell Medal in 1984. She was also a member of National Institute of Arts and Letters. McCarthy wrote her novels to describe the life of her own generation. Her writing not only reflects a life lived across most of the 20th century, but in its depth and breadth reveals a writer deeply engaged in sociological, historical, and literary concerns of that tumultuous century. On the one hand, America's urbanization and commercialization was embraced by some of its citizens, on the other hand writers like McCarthy produced novels, short stories, and drama's reviews as well as cultural and artistic critiques of modern America. Her fiction and non-fiction works are closely connected to each other. They share a complete concern with traditional approaches to race, class, and gender with 'egalitarian' (the belief that everyone is equal and should have the same rights and opportunities) cultural values.

Keywords: formidable, theatre, sociological, historical, egalitarian.

No doubt, McCarthy propagates her own theory of writing. The path she follows is controversial. Her life challenges/defies conventional expectations for women living and working in the early 20th century. On the contrary, her writings mirror/reflect her adventurous and forward-looking perspective. Though she wrote openly and 'lived against the grain'¹ she was widely respected for her intellect, her sense of humour, and her wide-ranging literary contribution.

Her place in American literature is noteworthy. She belongs with a handful of American writers whose lives represent/embody legends at least as vivid as their prose. We think of Hemingway. His adventures were followed by millions of people. On the contrary, the Scandalous side of McCarthy's career, her slashing wit 'amatory'² wanderings, were the subject of 'red-hot gossip'³. For fellow intellectuals, McCarthy remained an original. She did not copy anyone. Her act, most notably a passion for laying bare deception, is a hard one to follow. This approach made her a 'whistle-blower in the House of Culture'⁴.

During her career, Mary McCarthy published seven novels, two collections of stories, three memoirs, two travel books, and nearly a dozen volumes of essays and criticism on art, culture and politics. Her works like: *The Company She Keeps* (1942), *The Groves of Academe* (1952), and *A Charmed Life* (1955), and *The Group* (1963) have been acclaimed her mouthpiece works, in her autobiographical stories when they were published separately, and then in 1942, when they appeared as chapters in *The Company She Keeps*. She continued with autobiographical stories, memoirs, and autobiographical novels; in literary and theatre criticism she had gained early notoriety for incisive irreverent confrontation. Her most recent memoir, projected as the first of three volumes, appeared in 1987. During these past forty-five years she has also published reportage, and individual essays of personal reminiscence. She has frequently been the subject of journalistic studies, as well as of several biographies, most recently the massive *Mary McCarthy: A Life*, by Carol Gelderman. The reading public has been repeatedly enlightened about Mary McCarthy's early life in Seattle, her childhood in Minneapolis, where she endured almost Dickensian horrors of brutality and neglect among bigoted Catholic relatives, her rescue by a Protestant grandfather in Seattle, and her intellectual salvation by the nuns in a Sacred Heart convent; then there was her brief foray into a public high school, and her safer haven in a Tacoma boarding school, modeled on well-known girls' schools in the East. From Mary McCarthy's memoirs, as well as other sources, readers know a lot about her years at Vassar, her unfortunate first marriage, her entrance into the theatrical and bohemian life of New York of the thirties, her marriage to Edmund Wilson, and her emergence in the world of the early *Partisan Review*, and its matrix of political and cultural controversy. A third marriage followed after the Second World War, and a more varied international life, which found its way into her work. There were books on Venice and Florence, and European friends. Political questions

continued to absorb her, and there were lectures and visits to Eastern Europe; later she would go to Hanoi, and would enter the troubled controversy over Vietnam, engaging in public disputation about the war with other intellectuals. There was a fourth marriage, a very happy one, finally, and a more settled life divided between Paris and Maine.

Writing steadily during all these years, Mary McCarthy has never been out of the public eye, and during 1980–84 she was very much more in it, following her accusations against Lillian Hellman during a television interview with Dick Cavett. The subsequent lawsuit and the publicity about it occupied her for some time, until Lillian Hellman suddenly died and the libel suit was withdrawn. Public attention since then has accompanied her frequent lectures, honors, and awards, assessments of contribution to literature and culture, and summaries of her achievement. During the early eighties, she suffered serious health problems (she is 76), but has continued to teach during part of the year at Bard College, where she taught first in 1945, brought there by F. W. Dupee, of the early *Partisan Review* circle. She has received the National Medal of Literature, and is a member of the American Institute of Arts and Letters, and since December 1988, of the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

Biographies of persons still living are difficult to write and to read. The subject of this one cooperated very generously, providing information and useful material about her. Others who were part of the story have also been made part of the research. The biography is long and detailed, with careful identification of people in Mary McCarthy's milieu, quotation of letters, elaboration of travel plans and house moving, and with 56 pages of notes. The bibliography is skeletal however, lacking dates when the writer's work was first published, and without even a selected list of secondary sources, although some are cited in the notes. Carol Gelderman has conducted lengthy interviews with many of the family members and old school friends whose life stories Mary McCarthy drew upon for her fiction, has examined records at Vassar, at the Tacoma boarding school, the Sacred Heart school in Seattle, and the convent school in Minneapolis; hundreds of people have conferred with her, searching their memories and providing copies of their correspondence with the writer; and altogether almost everything pertinent has been tracked down, including the middle name of the third husband. Unfortunately, it results in a longish book which does not really enlighten the reader.

Perhaps the biographer cannot gain sufficient distance on her subject, because Mary McCarthy is still living and was very helpful. The book begins so frankly from admiration that it fails to confront some of the serious problems of biography as a literary form. It reads inevitably as special pleading, or promotional material, almost as if it were written by the subject herself. Even the critical bits suit her well-known habit of public confession. Intensive interviewing of the writer's relatives and friends then becomes a part of this promotion; the biographer's interpretations are governed more by the directions outlined in Mary McCarthy's own memoirs and autobiographical fictions, than by a critical social and historical understanding of the subject. The people, places and events described are not really re-created, because they are not seen apart from the subject's view of them. Despite extraordinary efforts to recover the early Seattle and Minneapolis years, the seemingly muddled and graceless arrangements which placed the young Mary with uncongenial relatives, and the formative years of suffering, her biographer cannot get outside the young Mary's consciousness; later in the book, it is the older Mary's consciousness and convictions that are imprisoning. The result is a stupendous amount of detail, but little palpable reality⁵. This twentieth-century woman's wit has always brought out a battery of such threatening images from reviewers and critics—teeth, rapiers, swords, even stiletto and bayonet. Her savage satiric inspection of contemporary culture was liable to be performed on anyone or anything, seeming to know no bounds. She was thought to exult in the bold destruction of others' *amour propre*, in her cold, 'cerebral', heartless, cutting, acid approach to life. The title of a 1950 collection of stories and memories, *Cast a Cold Eye*, was taken by critics to be self-descriptive, as Robert Lowell predicted, and its source in a Yeats verse ignored. Her chilly merciless gaze on the world around her then became the thing she was known for, both in fiction and reportage, and repeatedly she would be asked to satisfy the appetite she herself had created. People who met her were surprised to find she could be charming and even kind; later, when she did not seem to speak in the voice known from her writing, reviewers found that she had 'mellowed'⁶.

Although Mary McCarthy had arrogated to herself a right to dissect and satirize, she failed to understand her friends' objections to her portrayal of them, in fact was *wounded* by their objections! When family members she had lost touch with protested her use of their lives in the early memoirs or stories, she would reply by wrapping herself in the mantle of the creative artist.

Some friendships were terminated. Claiming innocence of intent to harm, Mary McCarthy would throw herself on the mercy of an unspecified court. At the same time she would add to her list still another place, group, or person who would no longer welcome her: it seemed that her writing was too strong, fearless and honest for the self-protective people who disliked her irrepressible candor. In her own reckoning, her satiric gift was a kind of compensation for injuries received in childhood; but she also believed she had *earned* the right to mock others, no matter who was hurt, because she had paid for it in advance by her earlier suffering. She did not appreciate others availing themselves of the same privilege however, even when they may have claimed comparable early pain; when parodies of her work appeared, she felt deeply injured. Old friends who did not protest, abandon her, or respond in equivalent acts of satire, could expect little response to *their* pain, as, for example, Elizabeth Bishop realized, when she thought elements of her personal life had been used in 1963 in *The Group*. In the 1987 memoir, her old Vassar friend denies doing so but Elizabeth Bishop died in 1979 believing it. In the fifteen years that followed the publication of that most notorious of the exposé novels, which used the old Vassar friends for material, Mary McCarthy had not found the opportunity to correct her old friend's impression. Mary McCarthy thought that her own history had dried out her feelings, and the misunderstanding with Elizabeth Bishop clearly demonstrates how her absence of feeling worked out: 'Well! I am sad about all that', she observed in *How I Grew*, but not very, since it does not affect my love for her work and her, too (McCarthy 1987:88). That it might have affected Elizabeth Bishop, whether alive or dead, is, amazingly, not part of the picture.

Throughout her long and successful career, McCarthy circled back to the same concerns. Whether she was writing short stories or penetrating criticisms of political issues, the politics of gender were repeatedly at the center of her writing. Like many other women of her generation, McCarthy resisted the label 'feminist'⁷, but her work was clearly informed by a deeply held belief that traditional constructions of gender were ultimately destructive for both men and women. McCarthy understood that women needed to become economically independent from men in order to achieve psychological integrity. At the same time, it was almost impossible for her to create female characters that transcended the cultural limitations of their lives. Although the women in McCarthy's novels are liberated politically or sexually, they are often paradoxically hindered by their adherence to the traditional feminine code of passivity and dependence. McCarthy's women might give voice to striking out for a life of their own, but

they are also waiting for a knight in shining armor to save them from the world and, by extension, themselves.

Margaret Sargent, the recurring character of the stories in *The Company She Keeps*, is a woman not unlike McCarthy herself. Sargent is a modern woman who struggles through marriage, divorce, and other intimate relationships. She is one of the rare women protagonists who actually have a job in the public sphere in American fiction. She is, then, a woman representative of the social and cultural concerns of the twentieth century. However, she grew up in a culture that valued traditional femininity, her life is predicated on nurturing men who are morally, psychologically, or sexually weak. Her misplaced efforts to gain agency through the regeneration of these inappropriate men generally fail; ultimately, this narrative is an indictment of a restrictive, and even profoundly damaging, concept of redemptive womanhood.

Through the character of Margaret Sargent, McCarthy deconstructs the traditional trapping of courtship and lovely demonstrating how these ideals damage relationships between women and men. As the romantic heroine, Margaret knowingly (and often begrudgingly) accepts per formative qualities of romance. For example, in *'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt,'* Margaret really does not want to be seduced by the man on the train, but she reflexively accepts this traditional scenario because no appealing alternative scripts seem available to her. However, her experience in the context of this seduction is one of self-abnegation; Margaret Sargent feels like a 'slab of white lamb on an altar,' but at the same time she feels 'illuminated' by what she experiences as her self-sacrifice. McCarthy does not simply criticize the romantic performance as a patriarchal structure to create powerless and subjugated women; she also makes it clear that women are complicit in the creation of their own powerlessness and places pressure on women to examine their own false consciousness, which eclipses their pursuit of self-knowledge. These concerns are repeated in McCarthy's later novel, *The Group*. However, here McCarthy creates the characters of the androgynous Helena and Lakey, a lesbian, who represent a protest against the submission to traditional gender roles that prove destructive to the other women in this group of friends.

In *The Company She Keeps*, Margaret Sargent is finally capable of attempting to reorder her own consciousness, but she still has to deal with the fact that the men in her life—and in the larger world in which she lives—are generally unaware of their egotistical masculinity. Trapped

in infantile and self-indulgent behavior, as with the characters of Mr. Sheer in 'Rogue's Gallery'⁹ and Yale man, Jim Barnett, in 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,'⁸ the men in McCarthy's stories are ultimately ill equipped to embark on a rigorous examination of themselves and of their place in the world. This criticism of monolithic masculinity is echoed in later McCarthy's works such as *The Mask of State: Watergate Portrait*. McCarthy crafts descriptions of the Watergate group that portray its politicians as self-indulgent, arrogant, and domineering, matching the fictional men in *The Company She Keeps* flaw for flaw.

Particularly interesting in McCarthy's career is the inclusion of her own life as a literary representation of a woman's struggle in the world. In *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, McCarthy steps outside of her childhood to focus on it from both historical and political perspectives. To better understand herself, McCarthy goes beyond the boundaries of her own life to examine the life of her grandmother, thereby connecting the life of one woman to the lives of all women. McCarthy's grandmother, Augusta Preston, a woman renowned for her beauty, represents the nineteenth-century ideal of decorative, static femininity that must be rendered powerless and anachronistic in order for McCarthy to control her own place in the world. Through heightened security of the importance that her grandmother placed on her status as a great beauty, McCarthy frees herself from the painful legacy of womanhood as a state of perpetual silence and ornamentality.

Conversely, McCarthy writes of her great aunt, Rosie Morgenstern Gottstein, as an illustration of a beauty that belies simple ornamentation. McCarthy looked to this aunt—bright, vibrant, and opinionated—as a model of twentieth-century womanhood. By contrast, McCarthy invokes the life of her other great aunt, Eva, as one of mindless conventionalism. Though McCarthy and her readers understand each of these women to be bound by the constrictions and limitations of traditional femininity at the time in which they live, by connecting them to the narrative of McCarthy's own life of a later period, she reanimates them as illustrations of an ongoing construction of limited feminine spheres. Discarding these traditional constructions as she moves through her narrative, McCarthy symbolically separates herself, and her readers, from the damaging effects of this gendered past. In her life McCarthy stood in opposition to many of the powerless women she portrayed in her novels; in her work McCarthy aspired to the passionate and powerful ideals of contemporary womanhood.

Throughout her career, Mary McCarthy wrote about herself and her characters with the same unrelenting pursuit of truth. With each changing decade of the twentieth century, McCarthy reinvented her writing to reflect relevant social and political concerns as well as her personal priorities. From fiction and autobiography to literary and cultural criticism and political reportage and satire, McCarthy explores and exposes the underlying cultural assumptions of masculine privilege and the politics of gender, and she demands that her readers be as engaged as she was in the struggle to recognize that patriarchal values have repercussions far outside of the American home.

Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy is a massive biography of the novelist and essayist. It has a unique format. In addition to Kiernan's traditional narrative, the volume also reprints extensive excerpts from McCarthy's writings, quotations from book reviews and book about McCarthy, and the comments of hundreds of people who knew her. This makes for a complex portrait of an American writer who inspired both love and dislike from the individuals who were a part of her fascinating and controversial life. The book, in fact, functions somewhat like the written equivalent of a public television documentary, with both a narrator and witnesses to McCarthy's life taking turns peaking. Occasionally, Kiernan- an editor and longtime McCarthy fan is repetitious and provides too much extraneous detail. But because of its scope, this biography will replace existing treatments of McCarthy's life.

Nostalgia, no doubt, leads McCarthy herself to embroider this account, which joins reading with an aristocratic and obsolete regimen, but it is an instructive nostalgia. She was fresh from a parochial school, where little reading was done and where 'grievous' was pronounced as 'prievious'¹⁰. By a giddy feat of the historical imagination, she (not the girl, but rather the woman looking back upon girlhood) employs the rituals and traditions of her Seattle convent school to affiliate herself with France of the Restoration,

Works Cited:

Parini, Jay, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*. London: Oxford University: 2004,46.

Gelderman, Carol. *Mary McCarthy: A Life*. New York: St. Martin's, 1988, 25.

Jarrell, Randall. *Pictures from an Institution*. 1954. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986, 30.

Op.cit.

Brightman, Carol. *Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World*. New York: Clarkson Potter, 1992, 30.

McCarthy, Mary. *How I Grew*. New York: Harcourt, 1987, 28.

Op.cit.

Barrett, William. *The Truants: Adventures among the Intellectuals*. New York: Anchor Press, 1982, 35.

Gelderman, Carol. *Mary McCarthy: A Life*. New York: St. Martin's, 1988, 55.

Kazin, Alfred. *Starting Out in the Thirties*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1965, 75.

Costa, Richard. *Edmund Wilson: Our neighbor from Tolcottville*. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1980.