ANALYSIS

The Group (1963)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"A kind of compendious history of the faith in progress of the nineteen-thirties and forties as reflected in the behavior and notions of [eight] young women--college graduates of the year 1933.... No male consciousness is present in the book; through these eight points of view, all feminine, all consciously enlightened, are refracted, as if from a series of pretty prisms, all the novel ideas of the period concerning sex, politics, economics, architecture, city-planning, house-keeping, child-bearing, interior decoration, and art. It is a crazy quilt of *cliches*, platitudes, and *idees recues*. Yet the book is not meant to be a joke or even a satire, exactly, but a 'true history' of the times despite the angle or angles of distortion."

Mary McCarthy
Application for Guggenheim grant (1959)

"No one in the know likes the book, and I dread what will happen to it in the *New York Times Book Review*.... I've now read it through, and in my usual see-sawing, indecisive way have formed two opinions: (1) bad, that it is a very labored, somehow silly Vassar affair... (2) good, a kind of clearness and innocence, trying to be kind to the characters--one feels she often made them dull so as not to resemble any of her real class-mates.... I doubt if she feels it's much of a masterpiece, still the excitement of a first commercial success is intoxicating."

Robert Lowell
Letter to Elizabeth Bishop
(12 August 1963)

"In her persistently reasonable, acutely amused way, Miss McCarthy knows everything about these girls. If they seem to some readers grotesque, it is because we are made to see them, with unsentimental clarity, as all too human. Perhaps, as Miss McCarthy has implied, *The Group* is not, in the conventional sense of the word, a novel. But whatever we may call it, it is, in its own way, something pretty good."

Arthur Mizener

The New York Times Book Review
(25 August 1963)

"*The Group* is in many ways an admirable piece of fiction and the best book [Miss McCarthy] has written.... It is perhaps as social history that the novel will chiefly be remembered: but over and above its sensitive observations it has a quality that one has no come to expect from this particular author and that is compassion."

Granville Hicks
Saturday Review
(31 August 1963)

"Women's secrets again, told in clinical detail: a seduction told as though by slides in a microscope, is the best; also, various involvements of high-minded girls with low-minded men are wittily put forth. M's style has become v. sharp and economical, too. But the semi-Mary protagonist gets killed again (suicide?), while her other half (rich, soignée, onto everything) turns out to have been a corrupt and corrupting *Lesbian*, all along. V. strange!"

Louise Bogan
Letter to Ruth Limmer
(8 September 1963)

"Maisie had always, rather demurely, thought of the great event as a 'defloration,' from the Late Latin, *defloration*. (To everyone's surprise this sociology major had been a whiz in Latin at St. Tim's.) The funny thing was that never in the world would she have expected it to happen *this* way: on a rather tacky, flowered couch that opened out into a day bed. (Mother would somehow have minded the odious couch more than the 'event.') But demure, rather strait-laced as Maisie was, now that she was here in the cold-water flat she was determined to go through with it, like Kierkegaard through clerical ordination. For this squinty, pink-cheeked girl, it was a duty and the old American stock in her (along with the industriousness of Mother's Chicago meat-money parents) stood her in good stead as the evening wore on. Of course she was thrilled, too."

Xavier Prynne (Elizabeth Hardwick)
"The Gang" (parody)
The New York Review of Books
(26 September 1963)

"Mary tried for something very big, a collective novel, but didn't have the creative force to weld it all together, so that it falls apart into a series of disparate episodes, some weak, some strong, but not adding up to a whole."

Dwight Macdonald
Letter to Nicola Chiaromonte
(9 October 1963)

A somewhat cynical critic I used to know once remarked that if writers of fiction were forbidden to indulge themselves in elaborate descriptions of dress, furniture and food--the way freshmen in composition courses are forbidden to use too many adjectives--virtually the whole tribe of contemporary lady novelists would instantly be forced out of business. He had a point, I said, but what about Mary McCarthy? Surely she was different, surely she was better than that. He snorted: an intellectual on the surface, a furniture describer at heart."

Norman Podhoretz
"Mary McCarthy and the Leopard's Spots"
Show (October 1963)

"She is simply not a good enough woman to write a major novel; not yet; she has failed, she has failed from the center out, she failed out of vanity, the accumulated vanity of being over-praised through the years for too little and so being pleased with herself for too little; she failed out of profound timidity--like any good Catholic-born she is afraid to unloose the demons; she failed out of snobbery--if compassion for her characters is beginning to stir at last in this book, she can still not approve of anyone who is incapable of

performing the small act exquisitely well; she failed by an act of the imagination; she is, when all is said, a bit of a duncey broad herself; there is something cockeyed in her vision and self-satisfied in her demands and this contributes to the failure of her style.... Her characters will come from one class and make no heroic journeys to other classes, they will not look to participate in the center of the history which is being made, and they will be the victim of no out-size passion....

[Yet *The Group* is] her single most impressive achievement.... It has something new in it; it has a conception of the novel which is Mary's own, a tool by which to cut an ascent into some of the sheer ice faces of the social world. And that is her method. Her Method. For she has divined the first law of our social world, which is that we learn by what we can glean from a hundred alienations of context, from a thousand suffocations of our emotions."

Norman Mailer
The New York Review of Books (1963)
(17 October 1963)

"I was rougher on her than Mailer was. But of course he had that condescending 'now our Mary is running with the boys' attitude. I took her more seriously because I loved a lot of her earlier work. *The Group* was a real letdown. Particularly in her attitudes, which were, I thought, very snobbish. She beats up on those girls."

Pauline Kael (1963)

"Talking to the interviewer from *The Paris Review*, [McCarthy] divides women novelists into the schools of sense and sensibility, and brackets herself with Jane Austen as a novelist of sense. But without a firm moral basis the novel of sense soon degenerates into the novel of complacent, amused superiority. It is intriguing to speculate what Jane Austen would have made of the author of *The Group*. She might have given her the works."

John Gross
"Class of '33"
New Statesman
(15 November 1963)

"I thought what Mary did was rotten."

"I think Mary had a good deal of resentment and jealousy then."

"The only thing Mary learned to love at Vassar was the sound of her own voice."

"Rosilla was furious. I think all of them were except me. I don't know about Kay McLean. I think she irritated Mary and Mary got back at her."

"Mary didn't have any use for me and she could be ruthless.... I have nothing to complain about with my portrait. But I think she was getting back at people. She meant to do harm." [Kay McLean]

"It's awkward to gabble about someone you didn't like. I didn't like Mary. I never liked her.... I never read *The Group* because I wouldn't read Mary at all, but I know my sister was in it."

"I was fond of Mary and I wasn't upset when *The Group* came out, though I thought it was unnecessarily unkind.... It really isn't a good or deep novel. It wasn't really based on understanding people."

"The College should repudiate author McCarthy and rescind her degree. It's been done before by other universities, and for far less injurious offenses.... What's become of the sanctity of marriage? Is there no love or beauty left in sex? Alumnae, we've been sold down the river! Vassar, make us proud again. Do *something*."

"I enjoyed the wit and fine writing of *The Group* and its excellent ear for conversation, but while I relished the wonderful description I missed any intimation of sympathy or compassion and felt that in its

lack of depth and internal structure the book was more a piece of excellent journalism; an interim report rather than a novel."

"Nobody seems to realize it, but Mary put herself into all of the girls. For instance, Lakey is true Mary. Nobody seems to have caught on. They all think it's Kay. The description of Lakey is Mary as she saw herself. Black hair, white skin, long green eyes. It is pure Mary, and everything she did, except being a lesbian, is Mary. Lakey's life is Mary when she went abroad to live in Florence. And Lakey always has the last word."

"The people she used couldn't get back at her and she knew it. She picked on very conservative ladylike people who would never sue her. You would think that Mary who was vulnerable under that hard exterior, would know how vulnerable these women were. After all, she had suffered abuse as a child. But then, they always say that those who are abused as children go on to be child abusers themselves."

"I always found it in a way astonishing that the book was so extremely popular. She totally failed to capture the feeling of the thirties. Totally. Look, the thirties got the kids to go over and fight in Franco's war. It created Communist cells on campuses. It was a period of ferment, much like the sixties, only a bit different. That was not the kind of world that she built."

"'Put is impotent' was her line. Obviously what she said was untrue with respect to me. Still, it was pretty cutting.... I hadn't particularly liked Mary when I first met her and Mary had been on the make for me at the time. She must have resented the fact that I didn't go for her." [Selden Rodman]

"I had a funny feeling that what Mary was doing was trying to make up for the fact that she always felt socially inferior. In the social register way she was. But my goodness, she was so far ahead of us intellectually."

Vassar graduates (1963)

"Miss McCarthy's mastery of the intonations and vocabulary of what one might call 'educated-banal' is a remarkable *tour de force*, sustained as it is for almost four hundred pages. Only very rarely does she falter in her discipline: then the *author* enters, and one hears: 'Libby's red open mouth, continually gabbling, was like a running wound in the middle of her empty face.' Or, describing Norine: 'Her eyes, which were a light golden brown, were habitually narrowed, and her handsome blowzy face had a plethoric look, as though darkened by clots of thought.' At such moments one is forcibly reminded of what has been sacrificed to obtain the virtuoso style-that-is-no-style of *The Group*."

William Abrahams
"After the Daisy Chain"
Partisan Review
(Winter 1964)

"She had not had a great popular success, [but] that was to be hers with the publication of *The Group* in 1963. She described it in her *Paris Review* interview as a novel about the idea of progress in the feminine sphere, or rather the history of the loss of faith in progress: 'You know, home economics, architecture, domestic technology, contraception, child-bearing, the study of technology in the home, in the play-pen, in the bed.' And, to a great extent, she has accomplished her purpose. *The Group* is an encyclopedia of the mannerisms, the fads, the affectations of an era. The trouble with Miss McCarthy's method in this book is the trouble with John O'Hara's in all of his: that in an era whose chief social phenomenon is the amalgamation of classes, where hierarchies collapse before the chain store and supermarket, the proliferation of details about any one group (unless it has set itself rigidly apart) does not necessarily illuminate one's understanding of it.

In *A Charmed Life* and *The Groves of Academe* Miss McCarthy is dealing with vociferous minorities who care passionately about preserving their minority status. The details of their daily living are so many flags gallantly, comically, and ultimately unsuccessfully raised in the battle against uniformity. But eight Vassar girls of the Class of 1933 are not distinctively different in their tastes and choices from any other

eight American college girls. Indeed their depression-born sense of guilt, their need not to be 'different,' certainly not superior, makes them adopt a sort of economic protective coloration.

But perhaps this is precisely what Miss McCarthy is trying to demonstrate: that 'progress' has made us all one and a sorry blend, at that. Every young woman in the 1930's had to deal with sexual freedom and the remnants of the Victorian conscience, with the idea of Communism and the memory of *laissez-faire*, with the modern gadgetry and the specter of human dignity. If that is the case, Miss McCarthy could have spared us the tedium of some of her inventories. What, for example, do the following minutiae really add to our picture of Helena Davison, whose relentless energy has already been stated: 'She could write a severe little essay, imitate birdcalls, ring chimes, and play lacrosse as well as chess, checkers, mahjongg, parcheesi, anagrams, dominoes, slapjack, pounce, rummy, whist, bridge, and cribbage. She knew most of the hymns in the Episcopal and Presbyterian hymnbooks by heart. She has had dancing lessons, ballroom, classical, and tap. She had done field walks in Geology and visited the State Asylum for the Insane, bunked in the Outing Cabin, and looked over the printing presses of the *Dutchess County Sentinel* in Poughkeepsie.'

The description continues even after the above, but it has no more significance than the long list of periodicals, supplied in full, to which Helena's parents subscribe. Is the failure of the picture a failure in the author's power of selectivity or in the significance of modern details? It is hard to say. Edith Wharton, writing of a still hierarchical time in *The Age of Innocence*, was able perfectly to suggest the personalities of the widowed Mrs. Archer and her maiden daughter by supplying a few details of their daily existence. They 'cultivated ferns in Wardian cases, made macramé lace and wool embroidery on linen...' The real rocks on which the crafts of the Vassar girls founder are not the confusions of twentieth-century progress but the cruelties of twentieth-century men. Perhaps Miss McCarthy believes that one brings on the other. At any rate, one must turn back to the novels of Ellen Glasgow for a greater collection of cads than that which lies in wait for Vassar '33. Kay marries a confused and malignant bisexual who drives her to suicide; Dottie falls in love with a neurotic whose rigid separation of the physical and sentimental prohibits even a kiss after sexual intercourse; Priss is wed to a Spartan doctor who carries his fundamental principles to the point of near sadism; Norine's husband is impotent; Libby's ski instructor tries to rape her; Polly's lover wants only to obey his analyst and return to his estranged wife.

The only decent man in the novel is Polly's eventual husband, Dr. Ridgeley, who seems not quite real, being the *deus ex machina* who solves all her problems by *wanting* to live with her crazy old father. Lakey's surrender to the Lesbian persuasion seems understandable in the light of what she has seen happen to the others. The men are selfish, malicious, loveless, and obsessed with their own psychological problems. With all due allowance for the trials to young men in depression days it still seems that Miss McCarthy has stacked the cards against her group. Perhaps the trouble is that, as she has suggested, her women are all essentially comic characters, while her men are not. It is as if she had married Beatrice not to Benedick but to Iago.

All of which is not to say that *The Group* does not contain some of Miss McCarthy's most entertaining writing. The chapter where she comes nearest to accomplishing her expressed purpose, where her satire is at its most devastating, is that in which Priss, dominated by her narrow-minded and doctrinaire doctor husband, reluctantly tries to feed her baby from the breast. The phoniness of the cult of the natural in an age that has lost sight of nature is nicely caught in the screaming protests of the infant who is trying to adjust himself to the crazy world into which he has been born. 'In reality, what she had been doing was horrid, and right now, in the nursery, a baby's voice was rising to tell her so--the voice, in fact, that she had been refusing to listen to, though she had heard it for at least a week. It was making a natural request, in this day and age; it was asking for a bottle.'

Although Miss McCarthy shifts the recording point of view from character to character and speaks as the omniscient author whenever she chooses, she elects to leave the reader in some slight doubt as to whether Kay in the end dies of her own volition or by accident. Perhaps she was not entirely sure herself. Kay and Harald analyze each other fiercely and cleverly throughout the book. He, as the survivor, is given the last word on his way to the cemetery when he suggests to Lakey that Kay killed herself to prove her superiority to him, who had tried several times abortively. One is never sure, just as one is not sure of the validity of any of the many fascinating theories that they spin about each other. One is sure only of the fact

that there is no love between them, and that there never has been. They are terrible examples of their time, two scorpions in a bottle, lashing at each other in the endless jargon of their Freudian speculations. Kay is morally superior, like all Miss McCarthy's heroines, for she will at least admit the egoism that lurks behind her every act--in fact she will invent it if it is not there. Harald, the McCarthy male, simply sweeps the trash of his utter selfishness under the rug of a factitious psychological personality.

The accomplishment of the book is that even where it verges on the tedious, it is the tediousness of mid-twentieth-century life where the colors of the past blend into a dull brown in the electric mixer of modern technological civilization."

Louis Auchincloss
Pioneers & Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 181-84

"Mary McCarthy is a first-rate writer, possibly one of the dozen best writers of our generation, and as her publisher I have had occasion to appreciate the seriousness and dedication she brings to her art. The matter of explicit sexual descriptions in literature is part of our time--Miss McCarthy did not introduce the trend, nor is she the leading example of it--and it has developed from a score of influences and ideas that are difficult to assess, such as Freudianism, the anti-romanticism following the war, etc., et. As a publisher I cannot ignore serious writing of our own time. I would not consciously publish pornography, and I do not believe *The Group* is this: its purpose is not to titillate the senses nor to induce immoral thoughts, and I believe it does not do either. Actually, on this question alone--of course there is far more to the book that this--it seems to me that *The Group* leaves a reader with a sense that immoral behavior is painful, boring, and stupid. I doubt that you will agree, but this is an opinion shared by some critics."

William Jovanovich
Letter to reader defending *The Group* against accusation of pornography
to Mrs. Harry E. Sanford (25 March 1965)

"It's supposed to be the history of the loss of faith in progress, in the idea of progress... As she explained to the *Paris Review* interviewer, 'These girls are all essentially comic figures, and it's awfully hard to make anything happen to them.' Yet, to achieve any verisimilitude at all, she would have to depict some development or growth in her characters during the course of twenty years; and, following the argument she outlines in 'Characters in Fiction,' comic characters cannot develop: 'the capacity to learn, from experience or instruction, is what is forbidden to all comic creations and to what is comic in your and me.' [This is McCarthy's own limitation; consider, as only one counter-example, Huck Finn.]....

Blame cannot be assigned because Miss McCarthy has submerged her voice into that of her nine heroines and three of their mothers.... The best sections occur when Miss McCarthy gets all the girls babbling at once and then breaks in to show the reader what certain of the characters are thinking privately. The weakest chapters are those in which she is mimicking someone like Libby MacAusland or Priss Hartshorn. Miss McCarthy succeeds in reproducing the educated banality of their speech, but the effect is tedious.... Libby MacAusland *is* 'a duncey broad,' and the sections on 'Duncy' (as Norman Mailer persists rightfully in calling her) are annoying....

Miss McCarthy is good at beginnings and at paradoxes. But the endings, resting as they do on paradoxes, fail to resolve the problem of intention. And, of course, the device of narrative mimicry excludes the possibility of the author's supplying an intention. The conclusion of *The Group* is ambiguous also, for Miss McCarthy has simply presented another paradox in the supposed triumph of Elinor Eastlake.... Collective mimicry provides a 'voice' or style well suited to the purposes of the mock-chronicle: 'They were in the throes of discovering New York, imagine it, when some of them had actually lived here all their lives...' Each shares the belief that 'the worst fate' would lie in becoming 'stuffy and frightened' like Mother and Dad. And each has vowed not to marry a banker or broker or corporation lawyer....one of those dull purplish young men of their own set...' Even the religiosity of the rector's words assumes a disquieting significance in the light of Kay's self-announced scientific atheism.... 'Love, she said, was an illusion'....

Mary McCarthy has long been accused of not creating very likeable male characters. And the men in her short stories and novels, if they are treated in any depth, are either mildly repellent Babbitts such as Jim

Barnett, the Yale man, or grandly unattractive egoists such as Henry Mulcahy or Miles Murphy.... With eight or nine heroines, Miss McCarthy does not have time to develop the male characters.... However...the Vassar girls are not particularly attractive either. Lakey is the only beauty of the group... None possesses any distinctive talent. Neither extremely good nor extremely bad, they represent--in a somewhat exaggerated fashion--their class and kind. But without doubt, the male characters are considerably less appealing, singularly and collectively, than the group. And none of the girls is so overtly destructive and malicious as Harald Peterson. Harald is obviously the 'wrong' husband for Kay.... Harald's inner uncertainty makes him incapable of giving Kay's energies shape and form (as he professes a desire to do), and he succeeds only in destroying her spirit. On the other hand, by being afraid to see the 'real' Harald and by setting levels of attainment impossible for him to reach, Kay is the partial agent of her own destruction...

The other husbands have their problems too. Putnam Blake, Norine Schmittlapp's first husband, is co-founder of an independent fund-raising organization for labor and left-wing causes... The only trouble with Putis that he is impotent, a circumstance responsible for Norine's falling into the arms of Harald. Her second husband, Freddy Rogers...is acceptable. but he is a banker. Although a product of Choate and Princeton, he is Norine's intellectual inferior, or so she believes. 'Our Vassar education made it tough for me to accept my womanly role'.... Only Polly Andrews' husband, Jim Ridgeley, seems really admirable.... The boy friends are no better than the husbands... Last in what Norman Mailer describes as 'the endless gallery of Mary McCarthy's feverish, loud-talking, drunken, neurotic, crippled, and jargon-compensated louts' is Dick Brown, one of Harald's wedding guests....

Chapters two through fourteen provide a substantial and satirical chronicle of innovations in the feminine sphere. The sections on Dottie Renfrew...illustrate the 'new' attitude toward sex and the 'new' technology of contraception. The clinically objective description of Dottie's first night of love-making is humorous because of its factuality and in its comical attention to details is similar to some of the sexual encounters in the novels of Henry Miller.... Mary McCarthy's penchant for facts runs rampant. Not only does she discuss the diaphragm (origin, description, and method of insertion), but she describes the etiquette of contraception.... The question-and-answer period prior to the pelvic examination and the actual fitting is as comic as Dottie's subsequent struggles to learn how to insert the diaphragm correctly....

The four mothers who appear in *The Group* serve as an ironic contrast to the 'progress' represented by their daughters. The mothers (with one exception, and she does not count because wealth and stupidity have insulated her from the world at large) are more forward-looking and certainly more compassionate than their daughters.... The necessity of dealing with eight 'heroines' causes [a] dropping and picking up of characters. Unfortunately, some of the more potentially interesting characters (like Pokey) are arbitrarily dismissed.... Other members of the group, in their different ways, also represent 'progress.' The chapter dealing with Libby MacAusland depicts the Vassar graduate as career girl. The special circumstances and procedures involved in having an affair with a married man...are illustrated in the sections concerning Polly Andrews. A mild-mannered description of the Depression and the accompanying readjustment of certain social attitudes is given in the chapter depicting the arrival and settling of Polly's father in New York City. The sections on Kay and her life with Harald illustrate some of the advanced concepts in the areas of architecture, furniture, and home economics.... House furnishings, too, were to be simple and functional. America, she and Harald believe, is moving toward a glorious technocracy. Ironically, Kay is the first to be destroyed in the modern world she had propounded so valiantly....

Mary McCarthy has described *The Group* as a 'history of the loss of faith in progress.' Yet she gives to Norine, the outsider, the denunciation of progress that is the implicit moral of the book. Norine, however, cannot be trusted. Her championship of the cultural anthropologists and her advocacy of a neo-orthodoxy is simply another twist in the whole notion of progress, in reality a 'retrogression' similar in some respects to Sloan's advocacy of breast feeding. Also, her sweeping generalizations illustrate that her mind is still sophomoric and that she has not learned. But her strange power of endurance does allow her to emerge somewhat victorious in the last chapter. Although she had not been invited to Kay's wedding, she attends Kay's funeral and brings Ichabod, entrenched in a sling, with her....

The group *cannot* recognize that Kay has developed or changed. To protect themselves, they must see her even in death as one of them, as unaware still of the failure of progress. But, if Kay's death were not

accidental but purposeful, it can be assumed (following the line of reasoning in 'Characters in Fiction' and dramatized in *A Charmed Life*) that, during the seven years encompassed in this novel, Kay had learned something and that, by so doing, she became mortal and moved out of the cast of comic or immortal characters. If this is the proper interpretation, Kay's nervous breakdown is what prepares her to learn by allowing her to face her failure. The knowledge she acquires, however, causes her to lose her balance or her perspective on herself and on the world. This theory makes her death as inevitable as Martha Sinnott's and dramatizes, as well, the foolishness of believing in the idea of progress. Again, the device of narrative mimicry offers little assistance in solving the problem of the author's intention....

Although *The Group* ends with Lakey's apparent triumph over Harald, her last laugh is not the signal of a victory. The match is a draw. No winner emerges. Life simply continues. When Lakey 'tricks' Harald into exposing his hatred of 'abnormality' by refusing to tell him whether she and Kay had ever been lovers, he turns on her (contradicting his earlier declaration of admiration) and accuses her angrily of being corrupt, parasitical, and un-American. He asks to be let out of the car, exclaiming, 'You...bury her. You and the *group*.' As Lakey drives away, she looks in the rear-view mirror and sees Harald cross the road and start to thumb a ride back to New York City. Such an ending is no triumph, only another one of Miss McCarthy's paradoxes, eternal and unanswerable. Harald's hitchhiking back to the City while the group moves away from him toward the cemetery represents neither progress nor solution---because there is no victory. At the end, there is only Lakey's voice saying that she is going to play a trick on Harald to revenge Kay and women: '...From her point of view, which he did not consider, poor normal Kay would not have sinned by being her prey instead of his....

The Group is satire and not a realistic treatment of how a certain segment of society lived. Yet many readers have taken the realistic details at face value.... Wit, colloquial and anti-literary diction, and exacting descriptions of physical objects are the trappings not only 'of excellent journalism' but of satire--in particular, the kind of satire that employs parody. To the extent that the writer of the mock heroic apes a style that is dignified and learned, so Mary McCarthy, writing a mock-chronicle, traces with infinite care the progress of her eight heroines and their friends. The details are painfully realistic--and sometimes tediously so--but in Miss McCarthy's relentless cataloging the mechanicalness and repetitiveness are basically comic. What makes *The Group* succeed as a mock-chronicle is the cumulative effect of its 'histories' and the blatant stockpiling of its 'facts.'

But neither numbers and the accompanying lack of depth nor the painstaking attention to often picayune details and the resulting incongruity have proved sufficient to alert the unwary reader that *The Group* is something more--or less--than a novel. Why have such obvious signals failed to reveal a satiric intent behind the external, piecemeal realism of *The Group*? Part of the answer has to do with values. Mary McCarthy and her readers fail to see eye to eye; that is, her readers (including fellow alumnae of Vassar College) do not share Miss McCarthy's scrupulosity. Accordingly, they see Dottie as defamed and pitiful rather than as hilariously incongruous as she sits in Washington Square Park clutching the accoutrements of 'love.' And part of the answer goes back to the closed circuit of self-satire. Mary McCarthy is a member of the group--not as any one character but as a clever and not very secret sharer in their 'Vassar-ness.' But whereas some Vassar alumnae (and Vassar is nearly generic here) see only that Mary McCarthy has created an unflattering likeness of nine graduates of the class of '33, Miss McCarthy is able to hold herself at arm's length and laugh at some of her own foolish ways and enthusiasms--preferences that in themselves indicate a wrongness beyond the immediate object or advocate.

Critics looking for something nice to say about this novel have seized upon Polly Andrews. But the 'goodness' of Polly does not indicate that Mary McCarthy is 'mellowing.' Any group of eight is bound to have its healthy apple. Besides, as in her earlier fiction, Miss McCarthy is in partial sympathy with what she satirizes. Vassar and the lure of 'better things' are not so much to blame as the commerciality and ordinariness of the world and the eternal weakness of human nature that make the enlightened kneel before the false god of progress with as much alacrity as the uneducated masses with whom the 'group' moves as a barely distinctive entity.

Significantly, the detailing of recipes, clothes, and furniture that occurs in *The Group* is the 'drapery' that Mary McCarthy objects to in the fiction of other women novelists. As she relates in *The Paris Review*

interview, she once had considered the possibility of writing an essay that would divide women writers into those representing 'sense' and those standing for 'sensibility.' 'I *am* for the ones who represent sense....' Aside from abetting the purpose of the mock-chronicle, the attention paid to drapery or to the material sensibility underscores the element of sense that lifts *The Group* out of the category of 'a trivial lady writer's novel' (to use Norman Podhoretz's phrase) and makes this work more than a period piece. In addition, as in her other works, externals are pressed into service as a way to judge people. For example, Dottie, coming into Dick Brown's room and noting its bare neatness, believes that she knows something about the man....

A considerably more severe limitation on the effectiveness of *The Group* as satire is the ending which, as has been pointed out, is ironic (or paradoxical) rather than satiric. The responsibility for this shift in tone lies not only in the unresolved clash between Lakey and Harald but in the ambiguity surrounding the death of Kay Strong Peterson. As in *The Groves of Academe* and *A Charmed Life* in which emphasis on the character of Mulcahy and Martha and on a moral issue causes a movement away from satire, *The Group*, too, goes beyond the topical and the superficial to probe at something deep within the complex nature of man. Kay failed because she tried to realize her own ambition through Harald. But this is an error in judgment that sounds very nearly the note of tragedy, whether the person be a parent who tries to relive his life through a child or a teacher through a gifted pupil. For a person can realize himself only through the exercise of his own being. If Kay's death is a sign of her mortality and an indication that she has 'learned,' then these speculations are not simply fanciful, for she has the right to be considered as a serious heroine and not simply as a caricature. Of course, the significance of Kay's death remains a matter of conjecture, for the last word is the collective voice of the group and not that of Mary McCarthy."

Barbara McKenzie
Mary McCarthy
(Twayne 1966) 135-54

"The Vassar prototype--or the Seven Sister figure, because to the public mind there is not too much difference between the Vassar girl, the Bryn Mawr girl, the Wellesley girl and so forth--must by now be an easily recognized fictional phenomenon. To the general public she is richer, better dressed (in a recognizable style), from a 'better' family--usually white, Protestant and somehow 'aristocratic'--and her looks are standard: Anglo-Saxon, uptilted nose, free-flowing light hair, blue eyes, and an air, an easy grace, a worldly familiarity that marks her as one who knows who she is, where she came from and where she intends to go. Her path in life is unobstructed, and she is accompanied by a universal welcome. Like Daisy Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby* he voice rings with money.... And like the heroine of Ernest Hemingway's play *The Fifth Column*, another version of the universally recognized figure, she is badly educated and essentially stupid, bored while taking part in exciting and extraordinary events.... The Vassar girl is, in addition, the subject of well-circulated jokes....

Clearly then, the type was there, and it was possible, if Mary McCarthy wished to do so, to use it. She knew the standing cliche, but she chose instead to create a new one, a series of individual persons, almost all of whom, because of background, education, and the period in which they live, fail to 'progress.' Her book takes the Vassar-Girl type--secure, well off, Protestant, by chance at the same college in the same years, by choice in the same rooming group, bright, hopeful, confident, full of contemporary theories and, most of all, sure that she was 'going forth' to improve the world, a girl with a quick, retentive ear for the jargon of her time, a ready, uncritical acceptance of its cant, its theories, its advanced thinking, and a consumer's eye for what is modern and avant-garde--and submits her to the world at large for seven years....

This stereotype ('Poise. Social savvy. Looks. Success with men.... Aloof from the battle') is given to us only to reveal its falseness. Helena recognizes that 'if you rolled the whole group into one girl she would be what Norine said--a rich, assured, beautiful bluestocking.' She thinks that 'this view of the group was so far from the facts that she could not begin to correct it.' Mary McCarthy uses all the women to destroy out (and Norine's) preconceived view of the stereotype. What is left is a rubble of suffering, confused, insecure, pathetic women.... The novel sets about systematically destroying Norine's (and Mary McCarthy's) view of the goddesses, reducing them to the stair wealthy housewives of the last chapter....

The girls don't change or grow or even mature very much; they are what they were when they came to Vassar...and they take away from Vassar attitudes that fitted without strain into the mold into which they are poured.... Their years away from Vassar do nothing to modify them.... Their attitudes of wide-eyed, delighted discovery about 'the world,' their horror at deviations from socially acceptable norms, their sense of their years at Vassar as having been wholly idyllic, their loyalty to each other (born of social and academic class...and similar minds), all these are constants in them... The novel, a mock chronicle, is a satire, and so the characters can be, under the circumstances, nothing else....

Despite the intellectual gains to her personally, and the general advantages of a Vassar education that are extolled in 'The Vassar Girl,' *The Group* contains some of her more mature thinking on the subject of a college education for the small Group in the novel: for them it had very little, almost no value at all. Critics in general have avoided this point, but the truth seems to be that the eight girls are not the heroines of *The Group*, nor is there one conglomerate heroine made up of the eight faces... Nor are the men to any significant degree the villains. Heroine and villain are Vassar, the common spawning ground of the eight girls. It is to Vassar they constantly return in their thoughts, Vassar is the source of their allusions, the meat of their conversations. It determines their subsequent behavior and affects their values, or does nothing to modify the values they brought with them. Vassar gives form to their decisions in later life...they return to it mentally for advice, sustenance and a sense of security....

What these women think and remember depends to a large extent on what they did at Vassar, indeed on the fact that they *were* at Vassar.... At moments of greatest trial or decision it is to Vassar and to memories of Vassar that the girls turn for guidance.... Their ways of thought are attributable by Mary McCarthy totally to Vassar. Their judgments have been formulated there, their later behavior determined by the college.... After three years in New York [Polly] still considers herself 'a science major'... Priss interprets the toast to the class of '33 by 'the radio man' as evidence that 'Vassar girls, in general, were not liked...by the world at large; they had come to be a sort of symbol of superiority.' Vassar is mother, Bible, church and counselor to its graduates... It has a monopoly on what they have learned, what the know, and (this must be a major part of Mary McCarthy's point in this novel) it limits what they are capable of learning in the future. Clearly, of course, Mary McCarthy is talking here about what she observed in a limited group of her classmates, not in herself....

No alter ego for the old, constant McCarthy voice of the others novels exists in *The Group*.... The only time in direct narration that the narrator makes an appearance is to give stage directions necessary to the action of the story.... In one way or another, the novel is entirely talk, not interior, stream-of-consciousness talk, nor even internal monologue...but instead what she has termed *le style indirect libre*, fairly close to direct speech, or direct writing.... Now and then in the novel it is hard to assign the Voice to one girl or to two interwoven, as happens occasionally. At other times it is the Group Voice, choruses or echoes of other voices (teachers, mothers, etc.) that are being heard through theirs. The girls often serve as echoes because they are influenced by the other voices of their time, and attuned especially to the voices of the men they marry.... The novel's achievement is this elaborate orchestration. It is a choral work about a short period in history, to be sung mainly by feminine voices, a persuasive and illuminating song cycle. But the failure of the novel, if it fails, is that this achievement was not easily or readily recognized. It requires close reading to see the narrative method. It was recognized by so few that the method itself must be at fault. So subtle is the vocal counterpoint that most critics failed to hear it, and so they stopped listening and made facile judgments about 'what Mary McCarthy is saying'....

[One] element of the novel contributing to its dense texture is the male characters. As they often are in Mary McCarthy's fiction, they are nasty, demonic, weak, and, in one way or another, somewhat unpleasant. Louis Auchincloss writes: 'The real rocks on which the crafts of the Vassar girls founder are not the confusions of twentieth century progress but the cruelties of twentieth century men...one must turn back to the novels of Ellen Glasgow for a greater collection of cads than that which lies in wait for Vassar '33.' Mary McCarthy admits that 'ninety percent of the men in the book are awful.... Those Vassar girls,' she told an interviewer, 'did not marry well.' Mary McCarthy's male characters have in general been unsubstantial fellows like John Sinnott; Polly's husband, Dr. Ridgeley; Priss' husband--unless they were malevolent like Miles Murphy, Henry Mulcahy, Harald Pererson, or 'spoiled' figures like Jim Barnett. Accosted by this fact

she says that in real life she prefers men to women but that in her writing her sympathetic men 'tend to be rather shadowy'....

She is wryly critical of the Vassar girls in *The Group*, of their inability to change, to progress intellectually and psychically...to remain immune to faddish thought... Just as the earnest little Catholic girl, wounded by a Dickensian childhood, lurks behind much that she writes, so the Vassar girl, '33, is the critic and judge of society behind the arras of a wider and more worldly approach. 'He was more intelligent than she was, but he had not had a Vassar education,' Polly thinks as she tries to decide about marrying Jim. The fulcrum is the Vassar education, for Polly, Kay, Dottie and all the others. It is, more often than she realizes, for Mary McCarthy too.... Only one classmate (at least in print) recalls her with something like compassion and admiration.... 'She remembers that Mary McCarthy was 'aloof, independent, irrelevant...lonely'... She appeared to be much freer than we were and this fascinated and frightened us'.... She never went back to a class reunion, to the intense relief of her classmates who confessed that 'we were terrified of her sarcasm....

Reviewers were divided...into two camps, both hostile. Between them was a small but loyal group of defenders. One group of detractors seemed to be unaware of Mary McCarthy as an artist of long standing with a considerable history as a novelist for whom *The Group* was a logical extension of her technique and subject matter. To these critics she was a sensationalist, writing a novel for popular consumption with some pretty heady chapters, and they wondered how such a popularity-destined novel could be worth anything. On the opposite side were critics who had followed her literary career from the beginning, who took this occasion to bemoan her passing as a serious writer, her descent into the marketplace. So blinded were they by what they regarded as a clear defection from strict ascetic literary ranks to the fleshpots of success that they could see nothing of value or interest in the style of the novel, and in most cases they avoided or missed the point of the manner of narration. Between the two groups were a few who liked the novel well enough to consider it seriously (Norman Mailer, for example, one of the few *male* critics to treat it with considerable insight), understood it, and were brave enough to praise it publicly.

To Vassar the book came as a bombshell.... By April of 1964 the full force of alumnae dislike was felt.... 'Loathed *The Group*,' [one] said in a personal girlish note to Mary McCarthy, 'but loved your new hairdo on the Jack Paar show.' For months to come, the alumnae indignation grew. One correspondent hoped 'the noble image of Jacqueline Kennedy would counteract' the effect of 'the keyhole peeping best-seller.' Another called upon the college to 'repudiate' Mary McCarthy and rescind her degree for her 'catalogue of venery, a disgrace to the printed word, and a blight on the reputation of a fine institution.' Only one brave correspondent from the class of '39 found the book 'nerve-wracking' and 'wrenching' to read, not because of its unfairness to the Vassar girl, but because she could hear 'in their choral voices shattering echoes of myself and my friends.' It did no good for this lone voice to point out that nowhere in the novel is Vassar attacked, or those who taught at Vassar, only the 'unreachable morass' of the minds of the eight Vassar alumnae. The intramural attacks went on. Vassar...indignation had three years to die down (it is now reliably reported that there is a paperback copy of *The Group* in almost every dormitory room at the college)...

The book made Mary McCarthy a great deal of money, made her internationally famous as only a popular novelist in our time becomes famous... Echoing her own youthful distrust, the critics took her commercial success very hard, and found all kinds of fault with the novel. They found that: not one of her 'bleating heroines' is fated 'to discover a decent, happy, conventional life' (Diana Trilling). She sets out to humiliate a group of girls 'as hard to tell apart as Disney dwarfs. *The Group* celebrates everything that drags down the human spirit and boxes it in' (*New Statesman*). 'In an era whose chief social phenomenon is the amalgamation of classes...the proliferation of details about any one group...does not necessarily illuminate one's understanding of it' (Louis Auchincloss). The book is 'a flatly written and incoherently structured novel that bears scarcely a trace of the wit, the sharpness and the vivacity which glowed in her earlier work' (Norman Podhoretz). 'The meaning of these characters is that they have no meaning' (*Christian Century*). It is a 'well packaged and mediocre narrative' (Maxwell Geismar). It was 'a major disappointment' (Stanley Kauffmann). Everyone of importance reviewed it.

Cyril Connelly extended his early admiration for the author of *The Oasis* to this 'completely feminine pastiche...a privileged insight into a purely feminine world.' Arthur Mizener managed the difficult feat of

praising and criticizing it in one sentence: 'If the characters seem grotesque to some it is because we are made to see them in unsentimental clarity, and all too human.' One critic thought her 'lode was petering out,' and called it 'tough-minded sociology.' Another found that 'there is no end to Mary McCarthy's cleverness, for here parody is itself parodied.'

The reviewers found everything in it. Reluctant admirers were glad to discover she wasn't as good as everyone had been claiming for twenty years; old admirers, themselves getting on, were glad to be able to proclaim this a good book, at least to find good things in it.... Another explanation of the success of the book lay in its liberal sprinkling of what the novel-reading public likes to call sexy scenes. Dottie's defloration, her subsequent visit to the gynecologist to provide herself with a pessary [diaphragm], Norine's narrative about her impotent husband, etc., satisfied the Sixties' taste for such clinical descriptions.... The critic of the *Times Literary Supplement* complained that he knew 'much more about Dottie's vagina than about Dottie.' The most subtle appeal to the feminine reading public, however, is the almost total absence of the author from the narrative. The reader has the fun of an eavesdropper...

This ventriloquism as a narrative device is apparently so ingenious that it was missed by many critics. It allows her to remain outside the moral questions, to avoid preaching and to do what we have always been taught is the proper approach in fiction, to teach by demonstration. Promiscuity on display becomes silent evidence of a distaste for promiscuity.... The reader is present at the Group's dishonesty, their snobbery, their self-delusion, so that when most of their lives result in commonplaces, in contrast to their aspirations, we understand why... To one critic this process of preaching by omission (or what might be called moral visual aids), is a sign of a strong streak of puritanism in Mary McCarthy....

The plot is a non-plot, almost a static state of being, in which the heroines are, continue to be, and then disappear from the scene only because the book ends (this is true of all but Kay, of course). Mary McCarthy says she had trouble making anything happen to her women. 'They really can't develop.' And they don't... They were destined to go nowhere....

Despite *The Group's* great popular appeal, and its success as an experiment in fictional Voice, it is, to my mind, a lesser work than *The Groves of Academe* or even *The Oasis* and *The Company She Keeps*. Its wit is more diffuse, the writing less pointed and more haphazard, so that it seems to be making its points indirectly, by omission. It is more shapeless than the other books (the inclusion of the Prothero-Hatten chapter pushes it out of shape in one direction, and there are other tangents like it), and so it seems at times to be 'out of control,' to fall away into the very welter of detail that is part of its method. The mass of detail obscures other necessary facts too: for example, that it is only on Libby's prevaricating word and Harald's embittered ones that Kay is said to be a suicide. There is so much talk in that chapter, so much documentation, that the reader is likely to forget Libby's propensity and Harald's character and remember only the echo of their remarks. This happened, of course, to many critics who got lost in the Voices, or did not remember the nature of the Voice giving information.

The Group is a negative book, a novel that brings bad 'news,' that conveys a hopeless, retrograde message. This is, of course, true of *The Oasis*, but for some reason it is more oppressive in *The Group* because *the number* of examples of hopelessness abound. And it is unselective, or seems to be so because of the wealth of detail. Everything that could be remembered of that time and that place has been put in so that the essential outline, often the essential point, is obscured. To my mind, the virtues of the novel, many as they are, do not outweigh its drawbacks. Artistically interesting and fine in many places, it does not stand in the front rank of the fiction of Mary McCarthy."

Doris Grumbach
The Company She Kept
(Coward-McCann 1967) 189-95, 50-55, 197-99, 200-01, 203-04, 207-10

"*The Group* (1963) was Miss McCarthy's first best seller, but to many critics it was an embarrassing failure. There were two main objections to the book. The first was that it exhibited a descent, surprising in so 'intellectual' a writer, to the preoccupations and the language of women's magazines. The second was that its characters were 'dummies,' all alike and all created merely to be 'humiliated.'

Now it is true that the success of the book is not uniform throughout, but to speak of that kind of 'descent' was possible only to those who took literally what was intended as irony, who ascribed to the author preoccupations and language of which the whole point is that they testify to the limitations of the characters. (Miss McCarthy herself has said that the novel is 'as far as I can go in ventriloquism,' and that almost all of it is enclosed in 'invisible quotation marks.') And that same inattention to significant detail probably accounts for the failure to notice that the novel's many characters are, in fact, sharply distinct from each other. The truth is, *The Group* differs from her early work mainly in its scope. Where each previous novel had been about some problem of a committed intellectual (though her heroines did indeed yearn toward the most centrally human), *The Group* is about the characteristic attitudes and life patterns of a whole social class, as shown in the loves, jobs, marriages, and housekeeping, as well as the cliches of thought and language, of a group of more or less ordinary girls.

To this one must immediately add, however, that the girls in her group *are* upper-middle-class college graduates of the thirties, which is to say they belong to a species one of whose main characteristics is a pride in keeping up with advanced ideas. In fact, these girls are a suitable subject for their author because their chief problem is another version of Miss McCarthy's permanent problem: the danger to the emotional and moral life, when the guidance of family ties and traditions has disappeared, of the freedom to live by ideas. Miss McCarthy has said the novel is about 'the loss of faith in progress.' This must refer to the author's own loss of such faith, since the characters who have it keep it to the end; it might be more exact to say that the novel shows the poisonous effects of that faith--of the confidence of most of these ordinary girls that they know better how to manage their lives than people ever knew before. In general, their troubles result from the fact that they are cut off by their advanced ideas from the realities of life and their own nature; less up-to-date, they might well have been better and happier people....

What unifies their varied interweaving histories is the story of one of them, Kay Strong. It is at Kay's marriage to Harald Peterson in 1933 that we first meet them, at her funeral seven years later that we see them together for the last time, and it is mainly because of her, her parties and her often grotesquely pitiful troubles, that the girls keep coming together during the years between.... Kay seems at times an oddly confused conception. Miss McCarthy apparently began by thinking of her as another 'sister' to Margaret Sargent; at least, her college personality and her life seem clearly autobiographical. An attractive girl, she came to Vassar from out West, dominated her college friends with her crushing analytical cleverness, was interested in the theater, married a would-be playwright whose bullying made her miserable, longed to be admired and was often awkwardly honest. But the girl whose troubles we now follow--this later Kay quite convincing and alive--lacks any kind of intellectual distinction or even interests and could not conceivably dominate anyone. In fact, her tragedy is precisely that she is a childlike creature...and pathetically driven by a snobbish longing for 'nice' things, who depends for her ideas and for her prospects of acquiring identity, self-respect, admiration on a husband who totally fails her. This husband is another of Miss McCarthy's fine monsters of egoism....

As I have said, *The Group* is not perfectly successful. A defect of its method is that characters whose human importance is comparatively trifling (Libby) or who are of mainly sociological interest (Priss) are treated as fully as those who engage the author more deeply; with such characters, though they are often amusing, the narrative urgency slackens. And there are Polly's two lovers, who seem created only to make points with or to serve the plot. Nevertheless, the book is mainly a pleasure to read. The pleasure comes from the characters (most of them), so pathetic and comic, so true, in their struggle to live up to their advanced ideas or to cling to reality amid the general falsenesses; from the continuous vivifying detail of their setting, appearance, tone, and gesture; and from the sheer quantity of people and experiences the story brings to life."

Irvin Stock
Mary McCarthy
(U Minnesota 1968) 35-37, 43

"The novel begins with their first wedding, a week after commencement, and ends with their first funeral, seven years later.... The central figure is Kay Leiland Strong Peterson, the boldest and most unconventional member of the Group....always, to some extent, an outsider, not 'born into the Social Register' or into great wealth.... They take the privileges and responsibilities of their class and education

seriously; they are interested in politics and social reform....Their determination to be a 'different breed' finds ceremonial expression in Kay's wedding.... It...occurs to them that Lakey, always 'frightening and superior,' will 'look down on them for not being Lesbians'....

The Group is a large and complex novel, with events spanning seven years and eight characters in their relationships with parents, lovers, husbands, and friends. The organization is chronological, with some departures... The narrative point of view changes; third-person throughout, sometimes the story is carried by the voice of the Group in a kind of chorus, sometimes of several girls, sometimes of one.... The changing voices are an important means of individualizing characters; as much as the Group have in common, they are fully differentiated.... Enormously popular, [the novel] was widely condemned, Grumbach observes, as trivial, as sensational, even as 'flatly written and incoherently structured'.... Even a more sympathetic reader may grant...that the novel is flawed. The inclusion of the butler Hatton is, for example, hard to justify even as an overelaborate metaphor of the insulating powers of great wealth.... In general, however, *The Group* integrates its diverse materials and interweaves the stories into a unified whole, which McCarthy uses as a vehicle for comedy and satire and as a means of exploring...'how hard it has been for intellectuals in our time to behave decently and humanely.'

The Group especially believe in social progress, and they desire not 'to become like Mother and Daddy, stuffy and frightened.' As a matter of fact, their parents are less stuffy at times than are their daughters.... The mothers have more resilience and imagination than the daughters; they are more substantial.... The Group's experiments in modern ways are unsatisfying....

There are various political threads in the novel, but the burden of leftist political activism is borne chiefly by Harald Peterson and Norine Schmittlapp. Harald foresees a brave new world of abundance and leisure, with artists and technicians (his class) rising to the top. Kay is very proud of him as a 'social thinker'.... The newspaper account of the strike and the arrest of Harald and Put provides a kind of pivot near the novel's center as characters read the news and react to it, at the same time bringing us up to date in their lives.... The modern way is crude and formless among the likes of Harald and his friends....

Harald and Norine are villains. More destructive than Jane Coe, less intelligent than Henry Mulcahy, they belong to the same class of self-servers, the chaos of their lives a constant danger to everything they touch, from social causes to other people's lives.... Neither in her political past nor in her religious present does the intangible of friendship with Kay prevent Norine's continuing her affair with Harald, although he has tired of her sexually and the betrayal of Kay now takes place at a different level. Norine was active in the disastrous events which led to Kay's commitment to a mental hospital.... Kay *develops* truthfulness; it is a thing that she learns.... "Harald isn't very truthful,' she tells Jim, 'and I've had a reaction against that.' She has had to learn the truth about Harald and with it the truth about herself.... Dismissing the universal experience of mankind as conservative prejudice, Harald assumes a superior posture as enlightened promoter of modern technology, all on the basis of his soup-drenched meatloafs.... His infidelity is a given, so far from being a vice as to become the occasion for virtue. *Kay* is the one made to feel guilty....

The novel has prompted many a contemptuous observation about its domestic details--its recipes and furnishings, from Harald's spaghetti to Polly's pate.... It is nearly four hundred pages long, however; McCarthy takes time and space to recreate an era and to create characters. She has been charged with writing talky novels, and there is a lot of talk in *The Group*. But if a novel is continuous with real life, both qualities are not only defensible but essential.... The details not only contribute to the reality of the novel but are part of its subject....

Kay, like Margaret Sargent, has trouble coming to terms with things: her seams are crooked at her wedding, and she improvidently dies without a dress in suitable condition for her funeral. But unlike Norine, who regards her slovenliness and disorder as a mark of her superiority to the trivial, Kay requires nice things and ceremony and associates *them* with superiority. She is a terrible snob, too.... Kay has a 'ruthless hatred of poor people'.... After she faces the truth in the hospital, we do not see Kay up close again. We hear reports that she went home for a year, that she divorced Harald, that she lost her job and consequently her apartment because of her confinement in a mental hospital....

The Group is grounded in the discrepancy between the expectations of the graduates who attend Kay's wedding and the attainments of the women who attend her funeral. Kay epitomized the promise of a modern way of life, free from stifling conventions, cutting across class barriers, equipped with the best new ideas. They admired her plans when she married Harald.... If, in 1940, Lakey is 'more human' than the others remembered, so are they all as they bury the hopes of their youth. The only sour notes are Norine, who shows up wearing her infant, Ichabod, in a sling 'to give him the experience of death,' and Harald, who arrives late and creates a small disturbance, thus provoking Helena to think that he is 'taking the joy out of Kay's funeral.' These two, however, no longer matter. The Group close around Kay...

Mailer complains that nothing happens to the Group, that they never break out of the cage of their character. But things do happen to them. They grow older, they marry, they have children. Polly has an affair; Libby is nearly raped; Kay is committed to a mental hospital; Lakey settles down with a female lover. They don't do much--that is the point. It is not the nature of mankind to break out of the cage of character--that, too, is the point. But one of the Group does.

Kay...is the first to understand that Lakey and Maria are lovers, and the others, uncertain how to act in this modern instance, turn 'by instinct' to her for leadership. She is the only one who claims to be able to picture 'with equanimity' the embraces of the lovers; the others come to like Maria 'as a person' but remain troubled by her relationship with their friend... Kay sounds perfectly natural, in short, and not in the least chastened and subdued. She is looking for a job and has an appointment for an interview with Saks. There has been some discussion by critics of her death as a possible suicide, but there is no reason to think that it is.... The evidence points toward an accident.... An accidental death is convincing and can be passed over quickly and lightly without intruding on the comic tone.... She has taken an honest look at what she is and has determined to stop deceiving herself.... The Kay-That-Never-Was showed off her apartment and her brilliant husband, but the honest Kay has nothing. The Group are mistaken in their judgment that she never grew older and wiser. She learned to live by the truth rather than by things.... And among things, besides her apartment and her possessions, we must include not only her husband but ideas that do not work.

The Group is a much better novel than is generally acknowledged. For one thing--and this *is* generally acknowledged--it provides a painless history lesson, being full of the gossip, news, and scandal of the 1930s reliably reported. More important, it explores the tenuous link between ideals and actions. The illusion of progress is always with us, as each generation fancies itself freer and more competent than its parents and adopts whatever is new in the world of ideas as the answer to the old problems it inherits.

The book should not be dismissed as a period piece; it contains the general truths about human nature that we expect in good fiction. What is uniquely successful about *The Group*, however, is McCarthy's use of the narrative voices to show both the unity and the diversity of her characters. Equally remarkable is the art with which she integrates all these materials into a well-built novel. Despite some problems of proportion, the parts of the book cohere, from the ceremonial beginning to the ceremonial conclusion."

Willene Schaefer Hardy
Mary McCarthy
(Frederick Ungar 1981) 77-84, 86, 88, 95-99

"In *The Group* (1963), Mary McCarthy characteristically provides a society within a society: here with 1930s Vassar graduates; in *Cannibals and Missionaries*, several liberals setting out for Iran, accompanied by millionaire art collectors; in *The Groves of Academe*, the English department of Jocelyn College; in *Birds of America*, a flock of birds. While this group functions within the larger society, it never really stands for that society, since McCarthy's grouping is so special. By working within a group, her equivalent of the squad or platoon in a war novel, she can exert control. Yet such focus is also a disadvantage, for it implies that nothing eccentric or unusual will penetrate, only what reason dictates. Here, McCarthy has measured her talents, recognized she cannot bend, and controls by forbidding expansion beyond the group.

McCarthy's work is characterized by two dimensions, both of which help to curb excessive individuality. The first is the idea of the inner society, whose other members act as pressure. Mere acquiescence to the group idea reinforces some form of social behavior. The second method is by way of

wit, traditional notions of comedy used to contain excessive individuality or ego. One thinks of George Meredith in his novels and in his 'Essay on Comedy,' where he defines comedy as that element which seeks out egoism and vanity, driving people toward norms of behavior. But McCarthy is interested in rooting out egregiousness. What has been called maliciousness in her wit is really not that, but a strong sense of what in the nineteenth century was known as propriety. McCarthy had the reputation in the thirties as daring and adventurous, even wicked, but overall she was taken with mediation, proportion, classical virtues. She was appalled by excesses surrounding her, politically most of all, but also socially and culturally. Her method may be Meredithian but her didacticism derives from Ecclesiastes: the world as a vanity fair.

In *The Group*, Harald Peterson and Kay Strong--she of Vassar, class of '33, he of Reed, '27--marry on the first page. Certain of their lives, they plan every detail of their future years. She will work at Macy's; he will progress as a man of the theater until he becomes an internationally known director. They will live in a certain kind of apartment, in a certain kind of neighborhood; and they will apportion their time down to minutes and hours. He will cook, when he has the time; she will learn from him. The background, we recall, was the Depression years. But even poverty is treated as something they could manage. As McCarthy comments: 'Great wealth was a frightful handicap; it insulated you from living. The depression, whatever else you could say about it, had been a truly wonderful thing for the propertied classes; it had waked a lot of them up to the things that really counted.'

Harald and Kay are not heroical creatures in McCarthy's treatment. Their ego has supplanted common sense, and like ancient rulers riddled with hubris, they must be reduced. The marriage occurs at the very beginning, and the rest of the novel charts its dissolution. McCarthy's wit does not destroy them, but diminishes their expectations. Even the spelling of Harald's name is an affection.

The structure of the novel is such that the Depression recalls everyone to some kind of reality, despite the expectations Vassar has raised in them; despite the wealth and status that many of the eight young women continue to enjoy throughout the economic slump. The point is significant: even those who have been relatively unaffected by the Depression's enormous disruptions are forced to seek different proportions in their lives. When Harald and Kay try to escape from all historical entanglements, McCarthy can identify them as among Meredith's vain and egoistic creatures. They must be shot down, as later, in a kinder way, Peter Levi is shot down in *Birds of America*, or in a more vitriolic way, Dr. Henry Mulcahy in *The Groves of Academe*.

Pulling against the Depression, the 'now' experience, is the memory of the Vassar years. As the young woman head out into jobs, marriage, affairs, trips abroad, their collective memory of Vassar is of some archetypal paradise, the Eden which lies deep in their collective unconscious as the kind, good place. The exchange of one society for another is vastly uneven, for Vassar raised expectations no society beyond it could satisfy. Unlike Rugby or Winchester, Vassar was not continuous with or a preparation for life; it deceived about life. Here is McCarthy's entering wedge: to present a walled-in Garden and then to eject her young women from it, Eves turned out.

This very conception, of Vassar as Garden, the world as unfamiliar and even alien, helps to support McCarthy's mockery. Yet so persuasive is her satire that little remains; the young women, *apart* from the ways in which McCarthy can mock them, are not persuasive. What they do, how they think, how they respond to stimuli outside the walls of Vassar College might have been of greater interest if McCarthy had been able to write about them in the thirties, but by the sixties, their pursuit of independence, romance, jobs had less thrust. In a real sense, McCarthy was trapped by her own sense of the material: not daring enough for the sixties; not sufficiently varied in her characters to permit them to break from her satire; too committed to her satirical means to provide alternative modes of existence.

Even the Depression recedes as a compelling phenomenon. We never observe its true deathlike effect: a nerve gas, spread by winds, which enters into every breath. Thus, the idea of the group within a larger body--social, economic, political--rarely works; Roosevelt enters only occasionally, and toward the end we hear of the war in Europe. The decade is spanned: Kay is buried at twenty-nine when France has fallen and the Luftwaffe is bombing England. That is, in effect, the end of the Vassar years, the final ejection from the Garden: Kay's fall from the window of the Vassar Club and the Depression winding down because of war."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 355-56

"One of the chapters, 'Dottie Makes an Honest Woman of Herself,' was published in *Partisan Review* early in 1954; it created a furor. No one before had written so openly about contraception. Dottie's visit to the doctor to get a pessary [diaphragm] written so matter-of-factly and with such unflinching detail, shocked nearly everyone, even Peggy Guggenheim. When McCarthy read the story at John Myers's apartment, Guggenheim was struck dumb and never once opened her mouth for the rest of the evening. McCarthy 'was a firebrand,' says Brendan Gill today, 'a pioneer taking big chances, and by doing so, increasing the range of permissible subject matter.' 'That woman,' said one wit, 'has done for the pessary what Herman Melville did for the whale'....

The novel consists of chapters written from the viewpoint and in the language of eight girls who have roomed together in their last year at Vassar and of Norine Schmittlapp, also class of 1933. McCarthy's own voice is almost completely silent; *The Group* is as far as she could go in ventriloquism, she has said. Since everything is written in the characters' voices, everything is dramatized. The characters do little besides talk, and their conversations effectively characterize them. This method requires that McCarthy confine herself to noting the trivia of their social milieu--appearances, dress, eating habits, furniture, small talk, and manners--and this enormous detail came from her memory. 'I have a belief,' she has said, 'that the only documentation that is any good is that which remains in the memory.' The only exceptions to the mimicry of *The Group* are the author's commentary and narration, which are kept to a minimum....

On the whole, the reviews of *The Group*, both pro and con, were milder than those for McCarthy's previous books.... Arthur Mizener's review on the front page of *The New York Time Book Review* was essentially a plot summary, and Granville Hicks's piece that accompanied a picture of Mary McCarthy looking like the Virgin Mary on the cover of the *Saturday Review* consisted of six noncommital paragraphs. Even when a reviewer seemed not to like the book, he said something that was likely to attract potential readers: 'the book is 95-pe-cent feminine gossip' that is 'very funny' (*America*); 'a gem of American social history' (*The Nation*); 'surface reproduction of the thirties is vivid' (*The New Republic*); the second-chapter seduction is 'so prolonged and so microscopic in detail that the author seems to have written it for burial in a time capsule against the day when sex is a forgotten activity' (*Newsweek*); 'an interminable catalogue of facts about food, furniture, clothes, birth control...especially among the rich...a mastery of social detail' (*New Statesman*)."

Carol Gelderman
Mary McCarthy: A Life
(St. Martin's 1988) 252-55, 257-59

"Louise Bogan was one of the few readers in 1963 who saw Mary McCarthy in Elinor Eastlake, a resemblance borne out less by appearances than by aspiration, by the telltale juxtaposition of wealth, beauty, and intelligence in the Lake Forest girl's vitae. (Of all the young women in the group, the 'rich arrogant green-eyed beauty,' who is played by Candace Bergen in the movie version of *The Group*, was the only one Norman Mailer said he wouldn't flee at a cocktail party.) But it is Lakey's lesbianism, established at the end of the book ('corrupt and corrupting' principally to Harald), that lifts her above the crowd and makes her a vehicle for McCarthy's more detached commentary on the group's relationships with men. Lakey's heightened sensitivity to women, especially to Kay, gives her critical judgments a cutting edge.

Lakey, who sails for Europe soon after Kay's wedding, returning for the funeral that closes *The Group*, 'is a kind of value center,' McCarthy once said; 'she is what's not in the book.' In effect, the "Madonna from Lake Forest,' whose 'fine white Renaissance nostril' is forever 'dinted with a mark of pain,' is the alter ego of an author whose own inner eye never sleeps. In *How I Grew*, McCarthy sounds exactly like Elinor Eastlake when she recalls how during her wedding night with Johnsrud she knew she 'had *done the wrong thing*. To marry a man without loving him...was a wicked action.' The twenty-one-year-old McCarthy hadn't done anything about it. Her realization was just another nocturnal emission; but out of such chasms between insight and action, both memoir and fiction came.

In her remarks on the economy of McCarthy's style, Bogan was also one of the few writers to understand what the novelist was doing with the patois of privilege that engulfs the book. Robert Lowell was another who saw in the novel's 'cloistered, pastoral souls breaking on the real rocks of the time' a portrait he would have liked to have drawn; although Lowell, alone among friends who spoke up for *The Group*, actually identified with the larger cast of McCarthy's characters. What was troubling about the story, he wrote Mary, was realizing how in the late 1930s 'we were ignorant, dependable little machines made to mow the lawn, then suddenly turned out to clear the wilderness.'

Among serious reviewers, only a few such as Robert Kiely in *The Nation* recognized that McCarthy was engaged in a virtuoso display of 'narrative mimicry.' Reviews in *The New Republic* and *The Reporter* ridiculed her for succumbing to the cliches of her characters, as did Norman Podhoretz in *Show* and Norman Mailer in *The New York Review of Books*. The dragon lady had fallen afoul the 'profound materiality of women,' Mailer declared, 'until the Eggs Benedict and the dress with the white fichu, the pessary and the whatnot, sit on the line of the narrative like commas and periods, semi-colons, italics, and accents. The real interplay of the novel exists between the characters and the objects which surround them,' Mailer observed, veering from reason to madness in a single sentence... Out of the obsession with *things*, he argued, Mary had failed to write anything more than 'the best novel the editors of the women's magazines ever conceived in *their* secret ambitions.' She was condemned for writing a novel of manners from a woman's point of view.... Nothing had persuaded McCarthy of the 'treachery of the New York Book Review [*sic*] people' more than that they had 'kept pressing' her to write for them both before and after soliciting the review from an 'announced enemy" (Mailer).... Nobody else dared to say anything bad about Mary McCarthy. 'I felt like I was attacking the King,' he says (not the Queen, the 'King')....

She was charged as well with the heresy of maligning the 1930s, which had become precious to younger intellectuals like Mailer and Podhoretz in the 1960s.... By seeing mainly 'foolishness and insincerity [in the 1930s] dream of self-transcendence,' [Podhoretz] argued, 'despite the fact that she herself was...beautified once by the dream'...the Muses had rewarded her 'with a flatly written and incoherently structured book, a trivial lady-writer's novel.' The 'lady-book' epithet stuck like a burr to negative reviews of *The Group*, including a few written by women. Eleanor Widmer called McCarthy's 'major triumph--a 'ladies' novel,' and went on to agree with Mailer that McCarthy had 'failed out of vanity, the accumulated vanity of being overpraised for too little, and so being pleased with herself for too little.... The vindictive note in these rebukes referred to McCarthy's mercurial career as much as to her book. Not just a novel but the character and life of a difficult woman--one, moreover, who had defected to Europe--was finally being put on the dock.... Letters to McCarthy were particularly threatening: "What kind of filthy perverted mind do you have to write a novel like *The Group*?'....

Fat and sassy and hugely successful, *The Group* offered McCarthy's critics the one weapon against which a serious intellectual lacked defense: popularity, 'the vulgarity of making good'.... Immediately upon publication in August 1963, the book shot to the top of the best-seller lists, where it would remain for nearly two years.... As of 1991, more than 5.2 million copies had been sold worldwide. Mary McCarthy had written a 'whopper, not necessarily a masterpiece--but a real novel,' wrote the *Chicago Daily News'* Hayden Carruth in a typical review from the daily press.... [Her] previous novels were scorned for their 'sneering attitude toward everyone and everything,' [whereas *The Group* is] a dazzling social panorama, 'one of the best novels of the decade'.... Arthur Miziner, Granville Hicks, Clifton Fadiman, Gilbert Highet, Edmund Fuller, Virgilia Peterson, all saluted McCarthy for her success. These were some of the 'literary salesmen' McCarthy had belittled nearly thirty years before in 'Our Critics, Right or Wrong,' including 'Kip' Fadiman, who now maintained that 'men resent the fact that she has a harder head than they have (she makes a so-called tough kid like Norman Mailer sound like an Eagle Scout'....

The Group, she argued from a stage jammed with overflow chairs from the audience, was two things her critics failed to understand: a novel of ideas (a purview of the 'idea of progress'), and also an experiment in marrying style with content, language with concept. Hence the cliches, the trivia, the group-speak mistakenly taken by her detractors as the author's own. As a novelist, she was also interested in showing how everyday functions become technologized. People don't think about sex, they think about contraceptives; women don't thin about babies but about breast-feeding versus bottle-feeding. Brand names are used throughout the novel not for snobbish reasons, she stated, but to demonstrate how what is primary

--the product--is superceded by what is secondary, the brand. 'A lot of the provincial critics got it,' McCarthy noted of this deliberate immersion into the mind of the feminine consumer, 'while most of the big-city critics did not.' The two Normans, for example, saw in her mastery of a vernacular that one reviewer called 'educated banal' only a 'deteriorated prose style'....

In *The Group,* as in most of her fiction, McCarthy's characters rarely cast a shadow longer than the personality index the author gives them. Trouble in McCarthyland is what's just around the corner, not what lies buried in the past, or in the future, or remains otherwise hidden from conventional wisdom. Big events and small, like Kay's incarceration in Payne Whitney, or Dottie, with her never-to-be-used diaphragm, being stood up in Washington Square, are pivots on which fate revolves to make its triumphs known; they rarely admit the unbidden elements of experience into the drama. 'One does not have to have that [horror] in one's novel,' Mailer said of the underground reality, 'but one has to have a sense of that madness if the book is to be resonant, and Mary,' he maintained, 'is too weak to push through the crust and so cannot achieve a view of the world which has root'....

McCarthy's former student at Bard, Eve Stwertka, also refers to when she wonders why the women in *The Group* never fully come alive for her. It is the problem Mary has with emotions, Stwertka suggests: 'She steers away from emotion and doesn't let herself handle emotion, and she is really quite repelled by certain kinds of emotions.' A novelist who shrinks from emotion, who fears becoming 'physical or even sentimental,' she says, risks becoming a caricaturist; so it is with *The Group*; 'it comes too close to satire to really work on all the levels a novel should.' (The same shortcomings may clear a path to first-rate criticism. 'She was our most brilliant literary critic,' Gore Vidal said upon Mary McCarthy's death in 1989, because she was 'uncorrupted by compassion'....

As social history, *The Group* is a hybrid, a fantasy, which would *not* be 'enormously successful as sociology,' as Mailer predicted, but would survive instead as a literary confection from a bygone era, a ventriloquist's tour de force. At Vassar in the early 1990s, the novel is still read by students for whom the old school, the female academy, exercises a mysterious attraction. But there is something missing at the core.... Into its carefully lighted scenes, its supple characterizations, its antic situations, McCarthy pours the paradoxical adventures of her youth; of that part of the 1930s that is an extension of her 1920s--although something of the materialist 1950s, when most of the book was written, forms the consciousness of her characters."

Carol Brightman
Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World
(Clarkson Potter 1992) 482-88, 492-94

"McCarthy's novel *The Group* was published at a very important moment in the history of consumer discourse in America. Written in the 1950s about a group of Vassar College graduates of the 1930s, *The Group* was published in 1963, some four years after Vice President Richard Nixon's Moscow 'kitchen debate' with Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev. Arguing the virtues of American and Soviet washing machines and color televisions in a kitchen set, Nixon and Khrushchev created in the public mind the so-called commodity gap. 'We welcome this kind of competition because when we engage in it, no one loses, everyone wins,' said Nixon. I will not suggest that the materiality of *The Group* is a direct result of the consumer politics of the Cold War, yet *The Group* does reflect a population fixated on consumption.... [But McCarthy] was as unwilling as ever to dismiss one of the only areas of knowledge and economic power that had been offered to women.

The Group's Kay (who is, to a certain extent, modeled on McCarthy) becomes an insider when a flair for consumer culture and a job at Macy's offer a short-lived sense of belonging. McCarthy's autobiographical sketch of Kay's democratic snobbery, her naive feelings of well-being brought on by new recipes for canned beans or a fresh pot of Maxwell House coffee, ultimately signal the insecurities of women whose intelligence is dept small and tamed, linked to goods. Yet when all else falls apart, there is a solidarity of truth in the fact of commodities. Canned beans become the communicable substance of identity in much of this writing.

The Group has prompted many a contemptuous observation about its domestic details--its recipes and furnishings, from Harald's chili con carne to Norine's conscientiously bohemian lair. Goods surround people with a discourse of their own. Details not only contribute to the reality of the novel but are a part of its subject. Kay has, she realizes, 'tried to bind [Harald] with possessions.' A lot of Kay's talk is about her acquisitions, including Harald, whose brilliance is one of her attributes, part of the success story she sends home. Kay, like Margaret Sargent, has trouble coming to terms with the niceties of things: her seams are crooked at her wedding, and she dies without a suitable dress for burial. Instead, her consumer expertise expresses her ambition, as she keeps up with the latest trends in manufacturing, display, and design. Equally keen is Kay's acceptance of new products, the result of new innovations in industrial design, men 'using industrial materials, like the wonderful new spun aluminum, to make all sorts of useful objects like cheese trays and water carafes'... The man argues that he hates possessions, while Dottie is perfectly content to see herself as an acquisition, the right kind of possession, what she calls a 'true' possession, or incentive. Without possessions as incentives, she says, people would still be living in caves....

The world of *The Group* is a world in which style has emerged as the predominant expression of meaning. Kay's apartment reflects a bad marriage... These Vassar girls are able to express what they find missing only in identifying material lack.... As style becomes increasingly ubiquitous, other ways of knowing, alternative ways of seeing, become scarce. As Norine tells the Group, 'You're hipped on forms, while I'm concerned with meanings,' McCarthy sketches the ground zero of noncommunication.... *The Group* is rife with the life histories of objects. Perhaps the most memorable is that of the contraceptive device procured by Dottie, a commodity which negotiates the gendering of consumer education....

At the clinic where Dottie goes to procure the diaphragm, she sees her own consumer zealotry reflected in the furnishings of the doctor's office... The contraceptive is the thing that will tie Dottie both to her lover and to the rest of society. Kay's husband Harald provides an analysis of the diaphragm as signifier. This he calls 'the fetishism of property.' One of the novel's long-standing resentments is the men who trespass the halls of female consumer education. Nothing is more preposterous than the rhetoric of progress and class eclipse surrounding Harald's discussion of canned goods.... This economy of things, this narrowing of communication, becomes, in McCarthy's world, a gendered language, and a language of life experience. I take McCarthy's testifying to consumer education as a historical statement, a contextualization that returns, at base, to a childhood reading of magazines.... We see the framing of McCarthy's perverse pride in her knowledge of brand names as a complicated acceptance of models of selfhood from a culture in which limits are put on the female intellect."

Jill Wacker
"'*Knowing* Concerns Me': The Female Intellectual and the Consumer Idiom"
Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy
(Greenwood 1996) 48-52

"McCarthy has written that *The Group* is a novel about the 'loss of faith in progress' (quoted in Kakutani 265). With that word, she is, consciously or not, revealing the fatal flaw in belief in any ideology: God's grace is absent in any man-made ideology. A critical response to her Catholic childhood taught McCarthy to be sensitive to the dangers of uncritical faith as portrayed in her novels: faith in political ideology, faith in psychoanalysis, faith in technology, faith in social progress--all are faithfully deconstructed.

As a result of her own lifelong self-examination, McCarthy's critical eye looked coldly on the bohemian, intellectual woman who toys with sex and politics as a form of escape, or as a shield from some essential truth about herself or the world around her. With each heroine--Meg, Martha, Kay--Catholicism plays a smaller role as McCarthy grew further away from her Catholic girlhood, but since McCarthy was an infamously autobiographical writer, portraying herself in each of her heroines, all are effectively Catholic. Like her, all are unable to mediate between the traditional definitions of femininity embraced by the church, and the modern revisioning, an Irish-Catholic fatalism and a belief in free will: Meg tries psychoanalysis but even the psychiatrist becomes terrified at the conclusion that Meg's Catholic childhood and her resulting problems as an adult suggest a mechanical universe; Martha's seemingly moral decision to have an abortion indirectly kills her because it is a misapplied morality in the context of her bohemian environment; and the women of *The Group* all succumb to different but equally unappealing fates, while

the structure of the novel forebodes determinism, beginning with Kay's wedding and ending with her wake (a common trope in Irish-American literature)....

Much has been written about the passivity of the heroines in *The Group*. In the novel, Kay marries Harald even after she's realized that it is a mistake because she's lived with him; Prissy meekly follows the medical advice of her physician-husband even though she recognizes the sadism inherent in his prescriptions; and Libby romanticizes what is a terrifying rape. Yet Paul Giles notes that McCarthy intended them to be products of their time and place, unable to control their own destinies. The novel details the social and economic lives of a group of upper-middle-class college graduates during the 1930s, and it was criticized for is catalogue of details, from recipes for mixed drinks to the minutely detailed procedures in a visit to the Margaret Sanger Clinic.

All the girls claim that the worst fate would be to end up like their bourgeois parents; yet their lives become even more restricted than those of their more open-minded parents: Dottie's mother begs her daughter to try true love before marrying for security. Perhaps McCarthy is responding through her Irish-Catholic fatalism--all the characters, including the men (Harald repeats his father's professional failure), have little control over their lives; they are fated to follow the failures of their parents; or the economic, educational, historical and social forces are simply too powerful for an individual to overcome."

Stacey Lee Donohue
"Reluctant Radical: The Irish-Catholic Element"
Twenty-Four Ways (1996) 91-92

"Because [Elizabeth] Bishop did not spot herself in the novel and because she believed that its author had attempted to treat Frani Muser fairly, she was prepared to be tolerant. However, the majority of her fellow graduates could not bring themselves to be so generous. For them the book was a betrayal. In the most literal and immediate sense they believed its author to be a traitor to her class--not only to its individual members but to the class as a whole and to the entire college.

Where in these pages were the Elizabeth Bishops, the Muriel Rukeysers, the Eleanor Clarks? Why make her girls so fatuous? So in thrall to material objects? So preoccupied with sex? And why make the sex so explicit? Three decades later Mary McCarthy was dead and her classmates were still trying to answer these questions. For them the book's outrages and deficiencies remained a subject of perpetual interest, even when they could bring themselves to regard their subject with something approaching amusement. Or, if not amusement, then something akin to calm....

Much as she might like to believe otherwise, *The Group* had affected her as a writer. With its publication she had ceased once and for all to retain any vestige of the enviable literary halo of a gifted young tyro. For the playwright Lillian Hellman, whom she had once faulted for her 'oily virtuosity,' it was suddenly possible to say, 'I think Miss McCarthy is often brilliant and sometimes even sound. But, in fiction she is a lady writer, a lady magazine writer.'

Although *The Group* had brought her a vastly larger audience, it had done her little good with the readers who mattered most to her. For the *Partisan Review* crowd her prose had lost some of the sheen that had once dazzled them.... For them, and for the younger critics who were first breaking into print, the author of *The Group* was revealed as a Saint Joan who had traded her sword and armor for a tailored Chanel suit."

Frances Kiernan
Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy
(Norton 2000) 527, 540

Michael Hollister (2020)