

ANALYSIS

A Charmed Life (1955)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"He's not really meant to be Edmund, but a modern type of 'compleat' man who is always a four-flusher like a piece of imitation Renaissance architecture. To the extent that Edmund is a boor and a four-flusher... Miles is a kind of joke extrapolation of him--minus the talent, minus the pathos....; I've used certain episodes, altered from my married life with E., as the raw material to create him, and I've drawn on my own feelings quite directly, in the chapter where Martha remembers her marriage. But it's all changed around--not for purposes of disguise, but to make a new whole, as for example, the fire, the dead stepchild, Martha's flight in her nightgown, which are not versions of anything that happened in reality, but new inventions called into being by these new people.... Edmund has in common with Miles a capacity for behaving *incredibly*. But I'm not under the illusion that he would buy a portrait of me by Warren Coe or by Titian; or that he would bluster into my house and make a pass at me. Nothing could be farther from his character, which is that of a bourgeois family man; he has extremely strong notions of propriety."

Mary McCarthy
Letter to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.
(13 November 1955)

"The stuff that Noel Coward made into a glittering comedy in *Private Lives* Mary McCarthy makes into a glittering tragedy in *A Charmed Life*.... Both embody dire warnings of the perilous effects that first husbands are likely to exert if they are allowed to come horsing around second marriages. The greatest love affair in the lives of Miss McCarthy's heroines is always the courtship of disaster. They hate what they want when they get it."

Charles Poore
The New York Times
(3 November 1955)

"Does Martha still love her husband? Does she still hate her first one? Or does she perhaps still love and hate--in her thirties--only herself? Those who can lend themselves to Mary McCarthy's brilliant sophistication, relentless wit, and curious mixture of respect for the mind and disrespect for the soul, will want to know.... [But] the book will leave most readers quite unmoved."

Virgilia Peterson
New York Herald Tribune Book Review
(13 November 1955)

"Miss McCarthy once praised her own education in a very revealing piece about Vassar. Yet she is a living example of what happens when an artist of potentiality is deprived of knowledge for lack of immersion in the ordinary world. Miss McCarthy should have lived in suburbia, or married a politician, or joined the Waves or the Wacs, or done something else that would have brought more important material into contact with her extraordinary sensibility. As it is, she is wasting a ten-inch gun on gnats, and paying off old scores by striking at people she might as well forget."

John Chamberlain
National Review
(21 December 1955)

"*A Charmed Life* (1955) continues Mary McCarthy's satirical survey of the intellectual world, changing the scene from the progressive college to a semi-Bohemian community on Caper Cod. This community excludes the local village people, the 'natives,' and the well-to-do summer folk; it is composed of a little group of would-be artists or critics, living on their dividends or on borrowing, who prefer talk to work and who fear nothing but conventionality, having defined themselves in terms of their own revolt from the rest

of American life. Their lack of discipline and coherence has spread to corrupt the village of New Leeds which now exudes an atmosphere of feckless irresponsibility and juvenile self-satisfaction. They lead, these rootless intellectuals and poseurs, charmed lives.

Somewhere they subsist, year after year, anesthetized by alcohol, carrying on their interminable arguments, having love affairs with each other's spouses, sleeping off hangovers, and producing their little manuscripts or artifacts. Like the people in *The Oasis*, they depend on the technology of a civilization which they despise; they need deep freezes and canned foods as much as the worst Babbitt in suburbia. Indeed, their only difference seems to be in their dirtier homes. As the heroine exclaims in protest: 'This horrible bohemian life you see up here, with lily cups and beards and plastics--it's real leveling, worse than suburbia, where there's a frank competition with your neighbors, to have the newest car or bake the best cakes. I can understand that. I'm like that myself. But here nobody competes, unless there's a secret contest as to who can have the most squalid house and give the worst parties. It gives me the strangest feeling, as if I were the only one left in the world with the desire to excel, as if I were competing, all alone, on an empty stage, without judges or rivals, just myself.'

Into this world comes Martha Sinnott, possessed of an 'obscure fame' as a play adapter, and her second husband, John, she to write an original play and he to see that she does it. Martha, childless, also wants to become pregnant, and she accomplishes her object, but she fears that her pregnancy may have been caused by her ex-husband, the brilliant and terrible megalomaniac Miles Murphy, to whose renewed attentions she has succumbed after a bibulous party in which the *Berenice* of Racine has been read aloud.

Of course, anyone else in New Leeds would have let the child be born. John Sinnott need never have known what happened, and, after all, it *might* have been his child. But that is precisely why Martha is not a true member of the New Leeds community. She cares passionately about truth and her own moral position. She knows that it is out of the question for her to give birth to a child of whose paternity she can never be sure. It may seem a curious issue to make, but on it her whole integrity stands and falls. Going to a friend to borrow money for the abortion, she declares her secession from New Leeds:

"Her voice rose, in slight hysteria. Warren looked at her in consternation. 'Forgive me,' she put in. 'But it's true. And the whole world is getting like you, like New Leeds. Everybody has to be shown. "How do you know that?" every moron asks the philosopher when he's told that this is an apple and that is a pear. He pretends to doubt, to be curious. But nobody is really curious because nobody cares what the truth is. As soon as we think something, it occurs to us that the opposite or the contrary might just as well be true. And no one cares. "Don't you think that's the effect of advertising?" ventured Warren.

Warren, however, gives her the money, and she is killed in a motor accident on her drive home. For by her decision she has taken herself out of the make-believe atmosphere in which the New Leedsians live, and her life is no longer charmed.

The novel, thus, unlike *The Groves of Academe*, is more than a satire. Martha is a heroine who has a moral problem and with whose difficulties the reader can sympathize. But not enough. That is the trouble, and why *The Groves of Academe* is the finer work. Martha's scruples, particularly in view of her lack of them where Miles Murphy is concerned, seem as unreal as all the other worries in New Leeds. It is a bit difficult to see why, if adultery is so lightly accepted, its consequences should be so rigorously denied. Unless Miss McCarthy is saying that Martha had, for the sake of her own compromised integrity, to draw the line *somewhere*. But in all events the problem makes Martha seem a bit remote and shadowy.

Miles Murphy, however, saves the book. He is the only one really living character, a magnificent monster who gives the novel some of the vitality that Mulcahy gives to its predecessor. It is tempting to believe that it was he who impregnated Martha and that what destroyed the 'charm' of New Leeds was this insemination from the real world. He is a horrible great beast of a man, at once intellectual and physical, totally selfish, brilliantly witty, rude, magisterial, unexpectedly charming, and unexpectedly just. Beside him, their natural leader, the other characters seem silly asses. When he and Martha are together, they

dominate the conversation as they dominate the book. And, as in all of Mary McCarthy's books, the discussions are fascinating in themselves.

This is a sample of Murphy's acumen: 'Art historians pretend that it's the philistines that scoff at the new men. Pardon me if I say that's horse shit. The philistines aren't interested in art unless it's called to their attention as something they ought to get sore about. It's the boys and girls with the trained eyes that come to smile at the Armory show and the Salon of the Refuses--the ones who know better than the painter. Who laughed at Whistler? Ruskin. Who laughed at Socrates? Aristophanes. Who laughed at Racine. Moliere.'

Louis Auchincloss
Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists
(U Minnesota 1961) 178-80

"There may be something wrong with the novel, I don't know. But it was always supposed to have a fairy tale element in it. New Leeds is *haunted!* Therefore, nobody should be surprised if something unexpected happens, or something catastrophic, for the place is also pregnant with catastrophe. But it may be that the treatment...was too realistic, so that the reader was led to expect a realistic continuation of everything going on in a rather moderate way. It was, to some extent, a symbolic story. The novel is supposed to be about doubt. All the characters in different ways represent doubt."

Mary McCarthy
Interview with Elizabeth Niebuhr
"The Art of Fiction," *Paris Review*
(Winter-Spring 1962) 67

"Some of the same defects that mar *The Groves of Academe* as a work of satire also impair the satirical thrust of *A Charmed Life* (1955). The New Leeds of this novel is as foolish and dangerous as Jocelyn College, and its citizens tied as securely to artistic expression as Maynard Hoar and his faculty are to the apron strings of literature and philosophy. By concentrating on Martha Sinnott, however, Mary McCarthy places greater emphasis on characterization than on attack. The reader 'sees' much of the foolishness of New Leeds through Martha's eyes, just as he 'saw' the weaknesses of Jocelyn College through the eyes of Henry Mulcahy; but these characters are singular and their vision untrustworthy. Although Martha is determinedly an honest person and Mulcahy blatantly dishonest, both twist premises willfully in order to arrive at conclusions in keeping with their self-images.

Moreover, neither Martha nor Mulcahy is a representative type. The portrait of Mulcahy is not a satire of *the* college professor and that of Martha Sinnott is not a satire of *the* typical resident of an 'artistic' community. This atypicalness makes them ill-suited to be either objects of satire or proper vehicles for the projection of the satirist's vision. In both of these novels, satire against a community and its members yields to portraiture of an idiosyncratic character whose complexity demands that irony, previously only one of the weapons of the satirical offensive, become the dominant attitude. Consequently, the intelligent and highly individualized natures of Mulcahy and Martha Sinnott provide Mary McCarthy with a partial means of getting away from the kind of commitment that satire (particularly self-satire) necessitates to the detachment that irony permits.

The first chapter of *A Charmed Life* was written as a short story and published in *The New Yorker* (October 9, 1954). Miss McCarthy explains that when she 'conceived the idea of its being a novel, I think about all I knew was that the heroine would have to die in the end.' At first she thought of letting the abortion be the cause of Martha's death, but then she discarded this ending in favor of 'having her drive on the correct side of the road and get killed, because in this weird place everyone is always on the wrong side of the road. But all that is really implicit in the first chapter.' And the first chapter, with its satiric description of New Leeds and its list of reasons why Martha and John Sinnott should have avoided returning to this 'charmed' community, does foreshadow the inevitable tragic ending. New Leeds, Miss McCarthy makes clear, is 'haunted' and contains a strong element of the fairy tale, the unexpected and the catastrophic are natural to such a community.

But somewhere along the line, as the novel develops through the device of narrative mimicry and as the colony is weakened. The literalness (despite the exaggeration basic to satire and a certain amount of on in a rather moderate way.' In the final chapter, however, everything goes haywire, and the weirdness of New Leeds reasserts itself. *A Charmed Life*, Mary McCarthy declares, is 'to some extent, a symbolic story. The novel is supposed to be about doubt.'

The first chapter of *A Charmed Life* captures vividly and succinctly the peculiarities of New Leeds. Miss McCarthy maintains that she intended to describe a 'nice, ordinary, old-fashioned New England town.' But a compulsion to write 'on the bias' and to see 'things with a sort of swerve and swoop' causes her to distort and exaggerate: 'I don't know exactly how it happens. I know I don't mean it to happen.' And her nice old-fashioned New England town becomes a modern horror: 'Everything here multiplied, like the jellyfish in the harbor. There were *three* village idiots, grinning, in the post office; the average winter resident who settled here had had three wives; there were eight young bohemians, with beards, leaning from their pickup trucks, twenty-one town drunkards. In wife-beating, child neglect, divorce, automobile accidents, falls, suicide, the town was on a sort of statistical rampage, like the highways on a holiday week end.'

The inhabitants lead a charmed life because some mysterious force protects them from death. 'They have dozens of terrible accidents, and they're all crippled in one way or another, and yet, they have this marvelous power of survival. All those drunks and human odds and ends.' Drinking is one of the problems that accompany living in New Leeds, and the village boasts strong chapters of the Women's Christian Temperance Union (for the locals) and of Alcoholics Anonymous (for the 'foreigners'). 'Martha said people came here because they wanted to become alcoholics and were looking for a Rome to do as the Romans did in.' The excessive quantity of reformed or reforming alcoholics, the Sinnotts discover, takes the joy out of drinking: '...it was typical of New Leeds that you could not take a drink without wondering whether you might become an alcoholic. Everything here cast a menacing shadow before it, a shade of future perdition.'

Martha and John Sinnott settle in New Leeds, fully aware of these inherent dangers and of their own ominous qualifications for establishing residence in the community: 'two tiny incomes, an obscure fame (Martha's), a free-lancing specialty (John's), and the plan of doing something original.' Martha differs only superficially from other Mary McCarthy heroines--Margaret Sargent in *The Company She Keeps*, the wife in 'The Weeds,' and Katy Norell in *The Oasis*. Highly self-critical and impatient with clumsiness and untruthfulness, she sets as a pattern of behavior an ideal standard impossible of achievement. She describes herself as 'an absolutist. I want to be a paragon uniting of all the virtues.' Her arrogance stems from an inner uncertainty. And yet, like Margaret Sargent, Martha is intelligent, well-educated, and attractive, 'a strange, poetical-looking being, with very fair, straight hair done in a little knot, a quaint oval face, very dark wide-set eyes, and a small, slight figure; she had been on the stage.' As well, she had spent three of the seven years she and John had been married studying for her doctorate in philosophy, and 'three more years in which she did odd jobs--writing theatre notices, recording novels for the blind, making a new translation of *The Wild Duck* for an off-Broadway production--and one year that was wasted in false starts on her play.' The decision to move to New Leeds was prompted, in part, by Martha's need to have a controlled amount of solitude so that she could finish the play.

John, too, is striking looking, 'tall and small-boned, with high-coloring, neatly inscribed features, and dark-brown, stiffly curling hair...' Although capable of self-sacrifice and seemingly of placing Martha's interests above his own, he is weak where he should be strong. Because he wishes Martha to be invulnerable or perfect, her penchant for self-criticism bothers him. But it is this state of perfection that neither Martha nor any other human being can ever attain. His living for and through Martha, despite his basic gentleness and goodness, is a form of escape, a way of dodging a confrontation with his inner self. His fits of temper and wild assigning of blame to others are further evidence of his self-doubt.

Miss McCarthy has explained that 'all the characters in different ways represent doubt, whether it is philosophical or ontological' (as in the case of Warren Coe, who questions everything) or self-doubt (as in the case of Martha, who doubts 'what she perceives'). Even Miles Murphy, Martha's former husband, who lives with his new wife and infant son in a neighboring town and who appears to doubt neither himself nor the constructs of his imagination, doubts the possibility of idealism in human motivation. Part of Martha's return to New Leeds is involved with a largely unconscious desire to triumph over the past by proving herself to Miles and thereby eliminating his spiritual but nonetheless real tyrannical hold on her. As his

wife, she had felt extremely inadequate. Her marriage to John had restored only some of the confidence that Miles had taken away. But, by coming back, she and John face the scandal that had surrounded her separation from Miles seven years before.

Miles Murphy is twenty-five years Martha's senior, 'a fat, freckled fellow with a big frame, a reddish crest of curly hair, and small, pale-green eyes, like grapes about to burst.' The product of Jesuit schooling, he had studied at Heidelberg, the Sorbonne, the London School of Economics, and with Jung at Zurich. His career had been many-faceted and relatively successful, for he had been a playwright, a writer of adventure stories, a psychologist, a lay analyst, a boxer, a magazine editor, and a practicing mystic.

Martha had met Miles when she had just graduated from college and was acting in a summer theater. At the time, she was engaged to a young architectural student and had 'just had a rather squalid abortion, which another young man had paid for....' Then, one evening, she was introduced to Miles who 'started bulldozing her into marriage before she really knew him. It was what she needed, he assured her, appraising her with his jellied green eyes when she woke up, for the second time, in bed with him, after a lot of drinks.'

Eventually, after four tempestuous years of marriage, she had left him. 'Their penultimate quarrel...had exploded in the middle of the night, after a party, when she was carrying out two overflowing pails of garbage and he refused, with a sardonic bow, to hold open the screen door for her.' Setting down one pail of garbage, she had slapped him across his grinning face with her free hand and had run off into the night to John, who had been vacationing in New Leeds. During the seven years that had elapsed, local gossip had magnified the incident so that Martha had emerged a scarlet woman, although in truth she had not 'made love with John until that night or uttered a word against her husband during the twelve afternoons they had talked together on the beach; she had been guilty before, but not with John.'

The difficulties arising from resettling in New Leeds are compounded still further by the curious deadlock into which her marriage to John had drifted. Although she and John still love each other, they have fewer illusions about themselves and less hope. They had once agreed that seven years is 'the fatal span for love.' Yet neither would have chosen to marry anyone else: 'From their point of view, for their purposes, they had had the best there was. There lay the bleakness, for them, as they were constituted, through all eternity, this had been the optimum--there was no beyond. There was nothing.' Her failure to have a child also disturbs Martha, and she considers their perverse return to New Leeds a 'sign' that she is to become pregnant.

And so they settle in their pale-yellow eighteenth-century cottage which they bought because 'they were afraid of being afraid to buy it.' Reasonably confident that their dislike of the social aspect of the community will act as protection, they attempt to live moderately and creatively. But rational theory and good intentions are impotent against the actualities of existence, as Mary McCarthy's earlier fiction--most notably *The Oasis*--has dramatized. Miles Murphy and Martha have to confront each other; and the 'plot' consists in the working out of this inevitability. Fate has two efficient assistants in Warren and Jane Coe, the most popular couple in New Leeds. On the surface, the Coes appear sufficient unto themselves and contented with being 'innocent spectators' at the various scandalous performances staged by the other villagers. In actuality, the antics of the New Leedsians provide them with a never-ending and much-needed source of delight and sustenance. Jane, a 'big, tawny, ruminative girl' of thirty-eight, is very different from her husband who is as conscientious as she is indolent. Twelve years older than Jane, Warren, who is slightly built and boyishly expectant, 'was a very excitable, forward-gazing person, very moralistic and high-principled, every moment was an adventure to him.' Despite their contrary natures, the Coes share an omnivorous appetite for life: 'This greed for experience was their innocent vice.'

Before settling in New York, Warren had taught at a school of design, but his stay in this 'artistic' community with its population of intellectuals and quasi-intellectuals had introduced him to the infinitely more challenging realm of the intellect and to an awareness of the interplay between 'knowledge' and art. And his particular mentor is none other than Miles Murphy. Thus the Coes are the agents responsible for the initial inevitable but 'unplanned' meeting between Miles and Martha when they invite the Murphys for what has become an annual October picnic on the beach. Later that afternoon, they move indoors to

Warren's studio to view a painting of Martha. The portrait, Warren explains, represents the equation upon which the atom bomb is based. In it, he had been experimenting with 'something new, a dispersed, explosive cubism, in dark, smoky colors, in which the sitter's personality-nucleus was blown apart into its component solids. There was a geyser of smoke in the middle representing the moment of fission...' He envisions his next series as encompassing the principle of the hydrogen bomb or fusion.

Unexpectedly, Miles offers to buy the painting. This decision sets off a discussion of ethics interrupted, of course, by the arrival of Martha and John Sinnott and Dolly Lamb. But nothing catastrophic occurs, and the meeting between Miles and Martha goes peacefully enough. Only Martha knows that she still fears Miles. Her disquiet is heightened by John's failure to recognize her inner agitation: 'She had always been able to deceive Miles because he did not know her.' Because he refused to consider idealism as a serious factor in life and judged by actions, he 'had mistaken both her faults and her virtues.' Unlike Miles, John listened to people and paid attention. Martha prized this faculty in her second husband and 'wished nothing to be hidden from him, not even the bad parts of her nature. She respected his privacy, because he was a man, but for herself, if she could not be transparent, she did not want to love.'

By being able to deceive John about her true feelings, she believes that she has reverted to a former self when, as Miles's wife, she had been forced to practice deception. And she interprets John's failure to perceive her fear as a sign that he, too, does not really know her. Yet, she acknowledges, a part of her nature always has remained hidden even to herself. When she had first met Miles, an 'irrational element' had entered her life, and from that time until the present she had failed to understand totally her feelings and actions. She confides these doubts to Dolly Lamb, the only other major character in the novel.

Unmarried and used to being prescribed for, Dolly had taken a cottage in New Leeds in order to paint the marshes because John and Martha had recommended that she do so. Although she shares Martha's self-doubt, her fear has another dimension that her manneristic and decadent paintings reveal. 'Every moment of her life was shot through with terrors...' The rustling of trees in the wind or the noise of the icebox running frightened her, and she tried to show in her paintings 'the absurd powers that were bending her to their will --nature as animate and threatening and people as elemental forces.' Her fear of the inanimate had made her retreat from direct experience, but since her thirtieth birthday the demand to see for herself had become increasingly strong. Unfortunately, New Leeds provides her with the wrong kind of person with whom to experience life. The story of her relationship with Sandy Gray, while not advancing the main plot, illustrates admirably the debilitating effects of living in New Leeds and adds to the general air of catastrophe that surrounds the community.

A second and final confrontation between Miles and Martha takes an innocuous enough shape. Again the Coes, as the hosts of a party during which *Berenice* by Racine is to be read, are responsible. To emphasize the heavy role played by chance in human affairs, Miss McCarthy has Jane Coe receive a telegram announcing the death of Warren's mother. Had she chosen to tell her husband of the news that day, the play-reading and the particular circumstances under which Miles and Martha meet again. In order to clear the stage of as many 'extras' as possible, Miles (Helen is home caring for their sick child) and Martha (John is in Boston) arrive at the Coes alone. Not only does Martha attend the play-reading against her better judgment, but she yields to Jane Coe's persuasiveness and agrees to come to the dinner beforehand. This arrangement not only brings her into closer contact with Miles but allows her to consume a good many before-dinner drinks.

In many respects, the play-reading scene is similar to the poetry conference in *The Groves of Academe* or the meetings of the colonists in *The Oasis*. Aside from the ironic parallel between *Berenice* and Martha, as the different characters talk, interrupting each other with their questions and points of view, they become known by their ideas. But the insertion of this kind of scene in the middle of a novel of manners is a curious display of literary derring-do. The discussion--which includes snatches of French and Latin and covers such topics as the differences between Racine and Corneille, the function of the unities in classical drama, Plato and the concept of love, doubt and the modern problem play, *Hamlet*, and so on--is interesting and even probably under the circumstances, but it also smacks of the smart bookishness of *Partisan Review*.

But the next scene picks up pace. When John telephones to say that he will not be arriving from Boston for another three or four hours, Martha lingers on at the party with the result that Miles takes her home. The flesh quickly triumphs over the spirit; for, 'an hour and a half later, he was making love to her on the Empire sofa in her parlor. She would not let him carry her into the bedroom, where they could have done their business in comfort. Straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel, as the Good Book said--that was milady Martha.' The seduction is seen through Miles's eyes; the immediate aftermath, through Martha's. And the event is undeniably comic.

At first, Miles had been uncertain whether he wanted to dally with Martha or not. But then 'the old Adam in him sat up and took notice. They were alone, hubby was gone--why not?... he tossed off his highball, wiped his lips, took a quick look at his watch, and started across the room for her.' Martha puts up a reasonably good fight, but Miles is persistent. 'Please don't,' she begged, with tears in her eyes, while he squeezed her nipples between his fingertips; they were hard before he touched them...' Finally, however, she takes 'a deep breath, like a doomed person,' and gives in. But her ardor cools during the time they are undressing and her responses are only half-hearted. Miles detects that she is 'trying to hurry him, which made him stubborn, though he was colder than a witch's tit and anxious to get home.' Then the realization that she is more than a little drunk makes him remorseful: 'Tenderness inflamed his member. Claspng her fragile body brusquely to him, he thrust himself into her with short, quick strokes. A gasp of pain came from her, and it was over.'

With Miles on his way back to Digby and Helen, Miss McCarthy switches again to the vocal consciousness of Martha who is busily packing up the beads that had spilled when her necklace had broken in the amorous play of the hour before. 'Miles had not enjoyed it much either, Martha said pensively to herself....' She knows that she should never have invited him to have a nightcap. 'But it had been one of those challenges that she always rose to, like a fish to the bait--the fear of being afraid.' Rather drunkenly, she rationalizes her folly and goes to bed.

The next advance in the plot is in the way of a discovery. Martha finds out that she is pregnant. Instead of being joyous she is deeply unhappy because of the very slight possibility that Miles might be the father of the child. Because her natural inclination is to have the baby and say nothing to John, she decides to have an abortion. 'The hardest course was the right one.... If her nature shrank from the task, if it hid and cried piteously for mercy, that was a sign that she was in the presence of the ethical.' On the credit side, her sleeping with Miles that night had served to free her from the past, and she knows that 'he held no further interest or terror for her. He was as dead as a clinker.'

She solves the problem of getting money for the abortion by enlisting the sympathies of Warren Coe, and, in a spurt of energy, she finishes the play, thereby fulfilling the second reason for coming back to New Leeds. 'It was like a fairy tale, in which you got your wish, but in such a way that you wished you had not wished it.' But Martha's preoccupation and restlessness are apparent to John, who interprets her strange behavior as a sign that she no longer loves him. Finally out of patience when she goes off to the Coes alone for tea (they were to have dinner elsewhere and one of their 'rules' was never to accept more than one invitation per day), he decides to leave her. Then, realizing suddenly that it was December, he has 'the clue to Martha's strange behavior.... She was thinking about Christmas.... She set foolish feminine store by anniversaries and holidays and loved to prepare surprises.' Sadness and love at her eternal childishness replace his anger, and he discards the notion of leaving her.

Martha, in the meantime, had eagerly rushed to the Coes to receive the money that Warren had secured for her at considerable sacrifice and with great secrecy. Driving back from the Coes, who had urged her to stay for cocktails with the local poetess, Eleanor Considine, she feels exultantly happy and anxious to return to John. 'Eleanor Considine, a woman of fifty, with dyed red hair and a long amatory history, was a cautionary example of everything Martha was trying not to be.' Martha had avoided meeting her because she wanted to be above the pettiness of the older woman's jealousy. Warren's stoutheartedness and cleverness in getting the money had made her feel as though she were in the presence of the sublime. And she is certain that whether eventually she tells John or not, everything will be all right between them.

Confident in a way that she had not been since she had met Miles, she knows that she is 'no longer afraid of herself. That was the reward of that fearsome decision, which not longer seemed fearsome, now that it was behind her.' She laughs and steps on the gas and, thinking of Warren, sings, '*Integer vitae, scelerisque purus*' [a man upright in life and free from guilt]. Then, around a blind curve, she sees the headlights of an oncoming automobile. Reason tells her that the rapidly approaching car is that of Eleanor Considine en route to the Coes. Martha slowed down and hugged her own side of the road. As the car crashed into her and she heard a shower of glass, she knew, in a wild flash of humor, that she had made a fatal mistake: in New Leeds, after sundown, she would have been safer on the wrong side of the road.'

The ironic ending is implicit in the first chapter, and the middle section is heavy with the theme of 'death in life.' Without question, the ending has thematic inevitability. Unlike Mulcahy whose instinct for self-preservation allows him not only to endure but to triumph within the academy, Martha, Miss McCarthy has explained, by admitting to herself that she is pregnant and recognizing that she must do something about it, 'becomes mortal.' But the decision to have an abortion, by affording her mortality, results in her exclusion from the charmed circle and the company of 'all those drunks and human odds and ends' with their miraculous powers of survival. Accordingly, 'she gets killed--to get killed is simply a symbol of the fact that she's mortal.'

Martha Sinnott has moved, therefore, from the category of the comic character with his guarantee of immortality to that of the heroine who exists in time and is capable of growth. What is ironic--or possibly simply weak--is that Martha achieves mortality or humanity through deciding to kill life. As Louis Auchincloss has observed, her passionate concern for the truth and her own moral position rule out the possibility of her giving 'birth to a child of whose paternity she can never be sure.' But a decision of this sort is seldom considered to be a manifestation of any particular inner strength. Also, since her first abortion is treated summarily, the significance of the decision to undergo a second loses force. But Martha's willingness to have this particular abortion as a result of the circumstances surrounding her pregnancy represents her triumph over Miles and self-doubt or, collectively, the past. Paradoxically, her new-found courage makes her ill-equipped to lead the uncharming charmed life of the New Leedsians and so she dies.

Esthetically, however, this ending is unsuccessful. The contrivance is too obvious. By making Eleanor Considine the instrument of death, Mary McCarthy resorts to a *dea ex machina*. In 'The Fact in Fiction,' she declared, 'There are no gods in the novel and no machinery for them; to speak, even metaphorically, of a *deus ex machina* is a novel--that is, of the entrance of a providential figure from above--is to imply a shortcoming....' The alcoholic poetess is a completely providential figure, for she does not exist until the last few pages--at least she receives no mention until then. Miss McCarthy has to interrupt Martha's happy reveries as she is driving back from the Coes to give a thumb-nail sketch of Eleanor Considine and her 'long amatory history.' Very neatly, Miss McCarthy has her represent the kind of person that Martha would most like *not* to be. Yet, in the weird world of *A Charmed Life*, there is an ironic appropriateness in Martha's getting killed by a person peripheral to her own existence and by one whom she mildly scorns. So the fairy-tale element in *A Charmed Life* can be made to excuse the sudden appearance of Eleanor Considine, but this same highly artificial contrivance can be used against classifying this work as a novel according to Miss McCarthy's own definition. In *The Paris Review* interview, she has acknowledged that perhaps none of her books can be properly considered novels.

Josephine Herbst notes that the contrived coincidence of the ending, by allowing Martha 'to bypass genuine experience,' leaves the reader and the protagonist nowhere. This criticism, of course, points out the problem central to that of narrative mimicry. The intention of the novelist is not made clear. What does Martha's death mean? Miss McCarthy has described Martha's dying as inevitable because it represents her moving from immortality to mortality. But where is the larger lesson? The implication is too narrow. To make the meaning of Martha's death have wider application, one would have to posit that learning to triumph over the past and self-doubt is a sign of mortality and leads to an immediate death--obviously a ridiculous assumption. Or, following a slightly different line of reasoning, one would have to say that in New Leeds this kind of fearlessness results in death--a somewhat more acceptable supposition. But New Leeds does not represent a microcosm of any larger reality. What 'meaning' and 'satire' *A Charmed Life* possesses are part of a closed and finite circuit and have relevance primarily in terms of the fictional world that Mary McCarthy describes.

Reviewers have noted that segments of *A Charmed Life* are autobiographical. New Leeds is identified usually as Wellfleet, Massachusetts, and Miles Murphy as based on Edmund Wilson. Such assigning of 'real life' identities, of course, adds nothing to the novel which, being far larger than autobiography, is a clever distortion of life. And, as Mary McCarthy has said, Miles Murphy cannot possibly be Edmund Wilson because Miles is tall and writes successful plays, and Wilson is short and 'everybody knows that Edmund never had a successful play in his life!' Her dismissal neglects with a tongue-in-cheek nicety the similarities that do exist between Wilson and Miles Murphy.

And there are other parallels. The 'real' Mary McCarthy shares the fictional John and Martha Sinnott's belief that seven years is 'the fatal span for love.' In a moment of marital despair, Miss McCarthy once told her brother Kevin 'that no two people should be *allowed* to stay married for more than seven years, unless they could prove in court that they *should*.' Also, Martha leaves Miles Murphy under conditions similar to those of Miss McCarthy's own abrupt departure from Wilson. But all that is past history. What is interesting is simply that, as Miss McCarthy matures as a writer, she continues to draw heavily from her own experience. In *The Group*, she keeps up this sometimes questionable practice and carries her ventriloquial act to, and perhaps beyond, its esthetic limitations."

Barbara McKenzie
Mary McCarthy
(Twayne 1966) 122-34

"Miles Murphy continues to remind the reader of Edmund Wilson. Mary McCarthy seems reluctant to write complete fictions or has rarely seemed to conceive of completely imaginary characters. Whether she is conscious of the process or not she shores up her portraits with facts that are indispensable to her *because* they are true.... She stays so close to fact, transposing and composing from many real sources but never moving far from what is or was... Even when she is attempting to camouflage, she cannot bring herself to depart very far from originals. The very clear half-step from Wellfleet to New Leeds (the place of *A Charmed Life*) cannot be missed.... Miles' inconsistencies of behavior, his enormous erudition and brilliant mind seem to be suggestive of Edmund Wilson.... Martha was terrified of Miles: 'Nobody, except Miles, had ever browbeat her successfully' and again, 'with Miles she had done steadily what she hated, starting from the moment she married him, violently against her will'.... Both she and Edmund Wilson say they see no resemblance between Miles and Wilson.... The resemblance was universally noticed....

All the winter residents in the group [in New Leeds] are artists, in some way involved with one another. This gives the novel the customary McCarthy air of a laboratory experiment. She seems to be saying to the reader: let us see how things will work out when these people are all put together in one place with all their absurd pretensions to intellectualism or creativity. How they work out is simple: the either, in the manner of all comic characters, remain precisely as they were when we first met them--this is true of the essentially comic Miles (his behavior in the seduction scene on the slippery sofa in Martha's living room is further testimony to the ludicrous nature of the sex act), of the Coes, of John Sinnott, the viscount, of Sandy and Dolly. Only to Martha does anything really happen so that she 'comes along' as a character. She is able to view herself pitilessly and to understand the real problem for her, the customary ambiguity involved in making a moral choice. Mary McCarthy has noted earlier this phenomenon, in 'Yellowstone Park: I felt caught in a dilemma that was new to me then but which since has become horribly familiar: the trap of adult life in which you are held, wriggling, powerless to act because you can see both sides'....

Martha decides upon an abortion because she cannot bear the dishonesty of not knowing for certain whose child she is carrying. She is on her way to Boston to have the abortion when she is killed instantly in an automobile accident. Mary McCarthy cannot resist the irony (and this was true of the ending of *The Groves of Academe* as well) of the final accident: Martha dies at the precise moment that she realizes she has changed. 'She was no longer afraid of herself.' At that moment the charmed life of the bohemian intellectual in which she has been preserved is exploded.... The last flash of irony, accompanied by a good Latin sentence, is a familiar coda for McCarthy fiction.... All of Mary McCarthy's powers of psychological observation, her way of pinning down moral and intellectual weaknesses and then revealing them in flashes of wit, are wonderfully combined....

Critical response to the book was, as it usually is to her work, divided. Most critics found it the least of her books, although Richard Ohmann called it 'the best of her novels.' Some found it static like *The Oasis*: 'She fails to engage her people in any meaningful action.' Others felt it was meager in ideas, even though it was possible to see that she was talking in part about the dangers of living among intellectuals who are as well dilettantes and bohemians. Later and looking back, some were to see *A Charmed Life* as an early archetype of *The Group*, with Dolly a progenitor of Dottie Renfrew, and the seduction scene a preparation for the Dottie-Dick section of *The Group*.... The idea of lack of progress in contemporary middle-class intellectual (or educated) society is here put forth strongly, to be taken up again nine years later in *The Group*. She is accused, further, of not moving her readers, of being 'uncommitted' and 'detached.' She is credited with doing a bloody vivisection and 'sniggering at the act of conception.' The *Time* critic spotted (among some flagrant misconceptions) what is clearly a partial truth about *A Charmed Life* and her other fiction, that it contains 'cadenced self-recriminations'... If Mary McCarthy is not sometimes calling for help, or at times asking for understanding for her personal plight, she is at least recording in fiction her painful, inexorable awareness of the damage that insight does to a vision of oneself, to living in a social group or with political ideas in which one has come to see the flaws. She realizes that the most highly touted moral perceptions are replete with self-delusion....

Doris Grumbach
The Company She Keeps
(Coward-McCann 1967) 119-21, 177-80

"Perhaps...the novel is her best so far, the most poignant and powerful under the usual ironic control, because she has here found a subject which dramatizes the conflict among her own most cherished values--that 'seesaw' between the demands of the self and those of 'impersonal reality'--and which therefore taps her own strongest feelings. This conflict is foreshadowed in a new twist given to her familiar heroine. Martha Sinnott is another woman of mind, another lover of that 'impersonal reality,' but an element in the type hitherto regarded as only a source of difficulty is now permitted to present fully its own case. For this very clever and learned young playwright is also a woman, as her husband tells us, with 'an obstinate childish heart,' one to whom reality speaks a 'little language' and who cannot bear that it ever utter, in her marriage, what is not true and beautiful and good. She not only insists that life conform to her dream, but, to make it conform, she dares to act as if, in the words of Katy Norell in her weakness, 'the past could be altered and actions, like words, 'taken back.'

Miss McCarthy herself tells us that the novel is about 'doubt,' and it is true that the doubt which, among contemporary intellectuals, automatically dogs every dream and every piety is important in the story. But even more important is the 'obstinate childish heart' by which the doubt is opposed. It is her heroine's 'romanticism' that is now this 'neoclassic' novelist's subject, and it is that romanticism's tormenting ambiguity which gives the story its wealth of meaning and its almost desperate intensity.

The romantic demand which Martha Sinnott (her last name suggests the McCarthy heroine's usual vain wish) makes upon life acquires a special urgency as the story opens because she has, to finish a play, come back with her second husband to the same Cape Cod town where she had once lived with her first--that is, to a place where her new love and new hope are in danger. New Leeds is dangerous for two reasons. First, because it is a contemporary Bohemia, full of artists and intellectuals who live in a state of freedom from tradition, convention, morality, and regular work. These are people who are always divorcing and remarrying, sinking into alcoholism or fighting it, falling down flights of stairs or into wells, and who yet seem to bear a charmed life--nothing seems to hurt them. The reason for this grows clear when Martha, in a moment of near hysteria, cries out that though the New Leedsian will never 'admit' to knowing anything, until it's been proved,' and though he is always setting himself free to do as he pleases by demanding, "Explain to me why not. Give me one reason why not,' the fact is, 'you don't really doubt. You just ask questions, like a machine.... Nobody is really curious because nobody cares what the truth is.' The New Leedsian's life is charmed into unreality by his moral indifference. Nothing really matters to him and so nothing can really hurt him. And that she is right to fear this moral casualness emerges when her husband goes out of town for a night and she is brought together by a friend--for the fun of it--with her ex-husband Miles Murphy.

Miles is the second danger she fears. He is not quite a typical New Leedsian, since he is capable of disciplined study and work (he is a writer and a psychologist). But he shares with the others their moral qualities. He is unscrupulous, and can cheat not only an insurance company but a friend. And he is brutally self-regarding and self-assertive: Martha had never been able to resist his utter inability to doubt himself. What all this clearly promises is fulfilled when Miles takes her home from the party. After a struggle in which she yields partly to force but even more to the pressure of Miles's conviction that it isn't worth fighting--there is no 'reason why not'--she lets him have her. One reason soon appears. Shortly afterward she finds herself pregnant. And though for the ordinary New Leedsian this would not have mattered, since her husband need never know what happened, for Martha it matters to the point of anguish. She cannot bear to have a child of whose paternity she must always be in doubt, or who might give the awful Miles a claim on her, and she cannot bear to base her life with John upon a lie. She decides to have an abortion. And it is in her struggle to determine whether this is right or wrong that we come upon that ambiguity already mentioned.

Such a way of making everything beautiful again has, to begin with, an unsettling resemblance to the ordinary New Leedsian's tendency to evade the consequences of his mistakes, to shirk responsibility. And yet the romantic dream need not always be self-indulgent fantasy. It may be the faith--the religion--which directs and ennobles our lives. In fact, Martha's inner struggle is sometimes described in religious terms. During one terrible night she is besieged and tempted by the devil himself, and at her blackest hour she finds rising to her lips the cry, 'Father, let this cup pass from me' [a quotation of Jesus just before he got taken away and crucified]. *Her* devil, of course, is a New Leedsian. 'The medieval temptations, with all the allures of gluttony and concupiscence could not, Martha thought, have been half so trying as the sheer dentist-drill boredom of listening to the arguments of the devil as a modern quasi-intellectual.' Heutters now all the bright ideas of contemporary sophistication, and his object is to convince her that her vision of the good cannot stand up under rational cross-examination. (In the voice of the psychologist Miles the devil whispers that she doesn't really want a baby and is merely seizing this pretext to get rid of it.)

Her dream is thus opposed by the devil because it is a dream of living for what is right and not for what is merely pleasant. Indeed, among her weapons, as she struggles, is a sense of how the right makes itself known that would have won the approval of the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*. It is worth quoting for its bold recapitulation of an unfashionable morality, as well as for its prose: 'Yet all the while the moral part of Martha knew that she would have to have an abortion because all her inclinations were the other way'... Thus the past-canceling abortion, which might well have seemed a New Leedsian act, takes on the character of an act of moral heroism, of faith.

Having won the inner battle, she gets the external help she needs from the artist Warren Coe... What he is and what the others are and, indeed, what the whole story is about is suggested in a delightful discussion of Racine's *Berenice* which is read aloud at that fateful New Leeds party. This play, in which the newly crowned emperor Titus must renounce forever his beloved Hebrew queen because a Roman may not marry a foreign monarch, is a tragedy about the conflict between love and duty. And though Miles and Martha came together at first like brilliant equals among ordinary people, it soon appears that it is Warren and not Miles whose ideas she shares. Miles thinks 'love is for boys and women,' at which Martha raises her brows and Warren, hearing his wife blandly agree, declares, 'I could eat that *rug*.' When Warren wants to give a hypothetical man who likes to murder old women a reason not to, Martha sympathizes with his wish for universal principles outside the self's wishes, but Miles thinks we do what we can get away with. 'The electric chair...that's the reason we give him,' he tells Warren, and then adds a remark for which one is tempted to forgive him all his crimes: 'For you, it's an academic question. If you don't want to murder old women, let it go at that. Don't worry about the other fellow. Live selfishly.' The play itself illuminates Martha's position by contrast. It is Racine's view that one can't live the moral life and have one's heart's desire as well. But Martha wants honor *and* she wants her love, she wants both together again as if her one lapse had never occurred; and in the world of Mary McCarthy, as well as of Racine, such a wish had to be in vain.

As Martha is driving home from the Coes' with Warren's loan for the abortion in her pocketbook, her husband, who thinks her recent preoccupation has been due to her worry about buying him a proper Christmas present, leaves a note in her typewriter: 'Martha, I love you, but life is serious. You must not

spend any money on Christmas.' And in this moving touch we are surely intended to see that John is not as mistaken in the nature of her errand as he appears on the surface. She does want to buy him a present, and she is buying him something only an 'obstinate childish heart,' impatient of adult seriousness, would dare to fix on. Moreover, she turns out to be childishly extravagant too--she pays with her life. She is killed in a head-on collision with another car. This death has been called arbitrary, but it is, with a sort of playfulness, given roots in the tale. The other car is driven by a woman who significantly resembles Martha, a woman with a past, a writer, an intellectual, and a 'cautionary example of everything Martha was trying not to be,' and she is driving--of course--on the wrong side of the road. It is clearly because Martha has been such a woman that she is now at the woman's mercy. With this death, the real, with its chain of ineluctable consequences, asserts its dominion over her romantic dream.

And yet--is Martha only another New Leedsian after all? Obviously, she is not--she bears no charmed life. The saving difference is that she cares, 'cares about the truth,' and cares enough--Miss McCarthy tells us this in the *Paris Review*--to 'put up a real stake.' We read near the end, 'The past *could* be undone, in certain conditions. It could be bought back, paid for by suffering. That is, it could be redeemed.' In fact, what makes her happy in her last moments is the conviction that she is earning back, by means of her suffering, the right to her husband's trust, that whether or not she later tells him what she has done, her ordeal would restore 'truth between them again,' and 'it would be all right.' It is apparently thus, and thus alone, that the romantic's 'obstinate childish heart' can be reconciled, in the world of Mary McCarthy, with her implacable devotion to 'impersonal reality'."

Irvin Stock
Mary McCarthy
(U Minnesota 1968) 29-35

"To be human is to live deliberately, to control one's affairs. That is why Martha and John Sinnott finally decide to buy the house in New Leeds. They would be returning to the village on the coast of Maine where, seven years earlier, Martha had fled to John and ended her disastrous marriage to Miles Murphy. What made the return to New Leeds seem particularly daring was the fact that Miles lived not far away with his new wife and baby. But Martha was writing a play, and New Leeds, beautiful and remote, seemed a perfect place to work; the Sinnotts had an opportunity to buy a house that she had always admired, and they were 'afraid of being afraid to buy it.'

The Sinnotts are different from New Leedsians, however. New Leedsians live chaotic, unproductive lives. They drink too much; they are forever in danger, forever getting hurt. But as Martha explains, 'Nobody dies. Hardly ever. That's it; they just get crippled.' Recognizing potential pitfalls, Martha and John make a point of living well-ordered, ceremonious lives. They work; they dress well; they have 'just one cocktail' every day at six except when they embarrass themselves by having just one more. Although disappointed that they do not have a child, Martha expects that they soon will have one. Now in their early thirties, she and John are an attractive, romantic couple and all should be well with them. But the opening chapter reveals the vulnerability of their entire edifice, the house with the small damages wrought by the summer tenant, the marriage with weak spots susceptible to small accidents. John cuts his hand and is annoyed that Martha is, as usual, unsympathetic and clumsy in nursing an injury....

Martha's society...is composed of artists and intellectuals, has-beens and would-bes in a state of retirement or escape from even the minimal reality of New Leeds itself. They are rich, like the Coes, or poor with 'tiny' incomes, like the Sinnotts. They ply their arts, develop their minds, drink a lot, like Miles--or little, like the Coes--or simply too much, like Martha.... In New Leeds, neither people nor their machines functioned normally.... Things are not, of course, always what they seem, but in New Leeds it is hard to make out even what they *seem*.... All the toil which sets the artists apart from the rest of New Leeds comes to very little.... In wife-beating, child neglect, divorce, automobile accidents, falls, suicides, the town was on a sort of statistical rampage, like the highways on a holiday weekend.... [Martha] and John know that they 'must be orderly and dignified; otherwise, they would surely go to pieces, like everybody else who came here'.... She was also one of many New Leeds wives bullied and even beaten by their husbands....

They are friends of the Coes, who moved to New Leeds ten years before, during the war. Warren Coe is an unknown artist.... Much of the action of the novel revolves around one of his pictures, a huge portrait of

Martha in a state of fission. His wife, Jane...enjoys the Coes' position as social center of the artistic set. Although wealthy, the Coes live plainly in a modern windswept house on a bluff, more ruined than merely weathered.... The Murphys evening with the Coes complicates the plot. 'Nonplussed' by Warren's portrait of Martha, Miles wants to buy it, and Helen, the perfect wife, has no objection to his owning a portrait of her predecessor; but the decision, Warren says, must be Martha's....

Miles is doing very well with Helen, his third, who is wealthy and 'all woman, and he was damn lucky to have got her,' he knows. He remembers Martha with affection nonetheless, especially when he has been drinking. Miles 'always had a weakness for intelligent women, though he knew them to be bad for him.' Older than Martha, he has been a 'successful playwright...a boxer, practically professional...a psychologist, a lay analyst, a writer of adventure stories, a practicing mystic, a magazine editor'.... Miles's purchase of her portrait is a disturbing reentry into Martha's life of the man whom she thought she had escaped. She takes Dolly Lamb into her confidence. She explains to Dolly that her marriage to Miles--preceded by her going to bed with him twice when drunk--engendered a continuing 'war of principle' between two people who claim to 'have the lowdown' on each other and that she will lose because it occurs to her that she may be wrong. 'Miles never has that experience.' After hearing Martha's confessions--that she is envious of Miles's marriage, that she fears that she wants a baby chiefly in order to have a 'better one' than his, that an abortion 'years ago' may prevent her conceiving, that she came back to New Leeds to show other people how 'tawdry' they are in comparison to her and John, even though she hates this in herself....

The climax of the novel is a reading, in French, of Racine's tragedy, *Berenice*, at the Coes' house. The Coes invite the Murphys, the Sinnotts, the viscount, Dolly, and a nondescript retired couple, the Hubers. Jane has a busy day preparing for the party. Making her rounds, she finds in the mailbox at the post office a telegram announcing the death of Warren's mother, and at a most inconvenient time. There is a storm, and Warren will not be able to get a plane to Savannah until it is over in a day or two.... It takes all of Jane's persuasion to get Martha to come without John. By coincidence, Miles shows up alone because the baby is sick and Helen has stayed with it.... The reading proceeds satisfactorily....

Eventually Miles takes Martha home, after both have drunk too much. Martha at first resists his advances, but, as he crudely reflects, she is really 'too ironic a girl not to see that one screw, more or less, could not make much difference, when she had already laid it on the line for him about five hundred times.' It frees Martha from the power that Miles has had over her. But the next morning, when John still has not come home, Martha is terrified that he might have come home early and seen her and Miles through the thin curtains. Perhaps he has left her, or perhaps there has been an accident. Only when he arrives safely home is Martha's life restored....

Martha, one morning in November, wakes up in the joyful realization that she must be pregnant.... But in the midst of her joy, she has a terrible thought: the baby could be Miles's. The possibility, though remote, is real, and she might never know the truth. She will have an abortion, but she will have to borrow money for it.... The sane New Leedsian would sidestep the consequences and produce the baby as John's, but Martha is not like that. Given the quality of her mind, it is a straight but agonized road to the decision to have an abortion.... Warren sees instantly that Martha cannot posit a life--hers or a baby's--on a possible lie.... Warren finally gets the money... When he calls, inviting the Sinnotts to tea, Martha and John quarrel over the invitation, and Martha starts off alone, later returning to tell John that she loves him before leaving again. John was almost ready to leave her, but now the meaning of her recent erratic behavior dawns on him. She has been scheming to buy him an expensive Christmas present; it is so characteristic of her.... In deciding on an abortion, McCarthy says, Martha steps out of the charmed circle of immortality; her death symbolizes the fact that she is mortal....

An 'exalted' Martha leaves the Coes' house after declining an invitation to stay for cocktails with 'local poetess' Eleanor Considine, who is expected at any moment. Martha hums as she drives. Once it is all over, she may tell John and have 'truth between them' again, but she wonders whether the impulse is pointless sentimentality. She knows, at least, that whatever she decides, it will be 'all right.' She is no longer afraid of herself. But now, seeing headlights reflected from around a blind curve ahead, she concentrates on driving and hugs her side of the road. The other driver would be Eleanor Considine, on her way to the Coes'. As the

cars collide head-on, Martha thinks, 'in a wild flash of humor,' that she has made a 'fatal' mistake: in New Leeds, after sundown, she would have been safer on the wrong side of the road.'

The major flaw of the novel is apparent even in summary. Eleanor Considine, a woman of letters who insists on considering herself Martha's rival, is unceremoniously invented a scant three pages from the end, characterized as a 'cautionary example of everything Martha was trying not to be,' and put into an automobile which, naturally, she drives on the wrong side of the road. She has not been mentioned before, yet here she is, complete with a brief biography to demonstrate the irony of the fatal meeting. She once ran away from a 'conventional husband'; her young second husband 'died of tetanus, all alone, in Mexico, from a cut she had neglected to have attended to.' A 'scribbler' of fifty, she is known for her 'artless, witty candor.' She has dyed red hair and a 'rough, ringing laugh.'

Martha has something in common with this woman; but Martha had her husband's cut attended to, she is not artless, she does not dye her hair or have a rough laugh, and she does not drive on the wrong side of the road. She is made of finer stuff. That is the point of her story, which McCarthy calls a kind of fairy tale. Martha's name--*sin not*--is descriptive more of aspiration, but her return to New Leeds is a test of her superiority not merely to the rest of the residents but to her own past. The village has preserved seven-year-old gossip which would suggest that she was quite in her milieu--of Martha leaving her husband's house in a transparent nightgown, stealing his Plymouth, deserting her child, joining her lover. There is just enough distorted half-truth in the story to trouble her....

The event that signals mortality is too perfunctorily arranged. Eleanor Considine comes suddenly, a goddess barreling along the road in a machine out of nowhere but the author's need for an appropriate way to kill off her heroine. There are other flaws in the book, most notably perhaps the insubstantial character of John Sinnott, who seems to be important but about whom there is little to say. He is like an imaginary playmate to Martha, praising, criticizing, echoing, or contradicting her; he seems quite nice but hardly functional. The villainous Miles is more interesting and more imaginative; a high point of the book is the conversation, which he and Martha dominate, after the play reading....

The characters are all--save John--well realized, both in themselves and in relationship to the design of the book. Dolly Lamb and Warren Coe are complimentary portraits of artists, her work lucid and over-disciplined and his obscure and experimental; both are tentative and isolated, however, confined within the cage of character and unlikely to break out. They possess a sense of wonder, a responsiveness, and a reluctance to judge, and they are the natural victims of people like Sandy Gray and Miles Murphy. They belong to the comic subplot. The book is successful, too, in its portrayal of Martha and the moral crisis of her life.

It is perhaps well to point out that this novel is not a feminist or pro-abortionist polemic. Martha is feminine in a way that offends latter-day feminists; she even 'obeyed' her first husband, though of course that was part of the regrettable past. In her relationship with John she wants 'nothing to be hidden from him, not even the bad parts of her nature. She respected his privacy, because he was a man, but for herself, if she could not be transparent, she did not want to love.' McCarthy refers to the over-thirty females in the novel as 'girls.' And the question which Martha must answer is not whether abortion is right or wrong, or whether she should be free to have one; the abortion of years ago is not part of the past that she regrets. The question is whether bearing a child of uncertain paternity is right or wrong under these circumstances. Martha considers it wrong, and the important thing is that she acts out of moral conviction rather than uncertainty and weakness. Making the decision is less difficult than gathering the courage and resourcefulness to act upon it."

Willene Schaefer Hardy
Mary McCarthy

(Frederick Ungar 1981) 56-59, 65-66, 68-73

"*A Charmed Life* is set in the imaginary New England town of New Leeds, a run-down bohemian village that closely resembles Wellfleet. Martha Sinnott, a writer, moves back to New Leeds with her second husband, John, after having left her first, Miles Murphy, from this very town several years before. Miles and his new wife live nearby. The Sinnotts return, they claim, to test their own strength by

maintaining order and achieving personal goals (Martha will write a play) while among the New Leedsians, who live unproductive lives--drinking too much, living on a combination of dividends and borrowing, preferring talk to work, and strenuously avoiding conventionality. Having defined themselves in terms of their revolt from middle-class American life, especially its work ethic, the New Leedsians aspire to be critics and artists without discipline; they live in a condition of directionless drift and lassitude. Because nothing much matters to them, they cannot be hurt; in short, they lead charmed lives.

'Daunted and somewhat abashed by their resemblance to the other New Leedsians,' John and Martha Sinnott are driven to prove they are different; they, unlike the other townspeople, must show they have no self-destructive bent. So, too, Mary McCarthy worried at first about how easily she found herself fitting in in Wellfleet. But in the end, she concluded she was safe. 'I really think there is such a thing as catharsis in writing,' she wrote Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., after finishing the novel. 'That is, I'm now utterly dauntless before the prospect of becoming New Leedsian, which seems to me, now that I've faced it, a child's bugaboo.' In facing the prospect fictionally, she also laughed at it and herself....

Martha's New Leedsian friends do their best to make her like them. They see to it that she and Miles meet at a reading of a Racine play in French, after which Miles makes love to Martha on her sofa, as John is out of town. Later Martha learns that she is pregnant, and not knowing whether John or Miles is the father, she decides, after much soul-searching, to get an abortion. Driving home after having secured the money to pay for it, she is killed.

Once again, Mary McCarthy used real-life models extensively in her novel. But she adapted and changed them for her artistic purposes. Miles Murphy, adept at 'the history of ideas' and at 'amassing information,' thus suggesting Edmund Wilson, was not merely a portrait of McCarthy's second husband.... Because of the obvious connection between the situation and setting of *A Charmed Life* and McCarthy's own life, critics latched on to the novel as a roman a clef. McCarthy has always objected to such literal-minded readings of her books. Those who regard her novels as guessing games or treasure hunts for the real-life models of her characters are missing the point. 'What I really do is take real plums and put them in an imaginary cake,' she has said. [quoting Marianne Moore]. 'If you're interested in cake, you get rather annoyed with people saying what species the real plum was.' She is well aware that the writer who wishes to write about what she knows will find her own life the best source material, or, as McCarthy has put it, 'The relation between life and literature...is one of mutual plagiarism'....

Her Wellfleet neighbors, in any case, thought McCarthy had used life a little too baldly in *A Charmed Life*. Phyllis Given, a neighbor and friend of McCarthy's from the days of her marriage to Edmund Wilson, said in a letter to John Dos Passos just after the novel's publication: 'I had a long call from Bowden Broadwater two nights ago.... We had a fine chat in which I said I thought the book was outrageous, and why didn't Mary try fiction. (I think I wrote you that they have sold their house. Bowden seemed sad about it. They are an extremely odd pair.)

Mary Meigs recalled the effect that *A Charmed Life* had on her and others who appeared in it. 'It was as though all of Mary's victims had been struck down with a wasting disease. I saw them, pale and shaken, unsure of themselves, unsure of everybody else (for this awful image of themselves might now be accepted as the true one), and I dragged myself about in a state of doubt and loathing for a long time.' Even McCarthy admitted that in the summer after *A Charmed Life* appeared, the women did not dare appear barefoot in the supermarket in Wellfleet....

It is obvious that Mary McCarthy had a genuine affection for the real-life Coes, just as the fictional Coes 'were the best-liked couple in New Leeds,' but it is just as obvious the Coes would not have relished being described in this manner in a book. Some of her real-life sources--Peggy Guggenheim, Dwight Macdonald, Emmanuel Rousuck--tolerated McCarthy's appropriation of them for her purposes. Other resented the way she wielded her pen.... This is precisely Mary McCarthy's idiosyncrasy: an urgency to tell the whole truth, as she sees it, about herself and others, no matter what the consequences.... That *A Charmed Life* is about doubt was not perceived by a single reviewer in 1955. Even now, her intended meaning is not apparent. In the late 1960s...she characterized *A Charmed Life* as 'a book I don't much like at this distance in time'."

Carol Gelderman
Mary McCarthy: A Life
(St. Martin's 1988) 185-90

"In *A Charmed Life*, an otherwise talky, over-narrated novel, the scene where Miles seduces Martha on the Empire sofa in her parlor fairly dances off the page. Only when these formidable antagonists are shown 'heaving and gasping' in the dark do they come alive as characters. Why? Perhaps because Wilson's 'capacity for behaving *incredibly*' (as McCarthy puts it in the letter to Schlesinger) was nowhere more pronounced than in his sexual appetites. McCarthy runs the seduction scene forward and backward, first from Miles's point of view, then from Martha's, a dramatic device that allows her to give full play to her own robust sexual imagination, and to a nearly inexhaustible appetite for remorse and self-castigation.... The scene is set with a few deft strokes. McCarthy gives us the devil, who tosses off a highball, wipes his lips, glances at his watch, and darts across the room: 'She had struggled at first...when he flung himself on top of her on the sofa. But he had her pinioned beneath him with the whole weight of his body'....

The scene, which is funny partly because the author has such a good time with it, is all the funnier when one considers the misguided view of Mary McCarthy as a scout in the 'feminist war that now rages within our society' (Barrett), a sex-critic like Marge Percy or Margaret Atwood.... In the novel, Martha has returned to New Leeds to write a play, a fact that angers Miles, a former playwright...'she had come back to compete with him again'.... The scene on the Empire sofa rings true not because it ever took place after McCarthy and Wilson's divorce in 1946 but because it was in just such a contest of wills, in which desire was pitted against fear...something that had haunted her about her 'surrender' to Edmund Wilson on the couch in Stamford in 1937.... Miles had not enjoyed it much either....

The climax was an anticlimax.... When she moves into the character of Martha, McCarthy displays that reductive sensibility so annoying to readers like William Carlos Williams, Malcolm Cowley, and Alfred Kazin.... 'She had not been alarmed for her virtue, feeling certain that she could free herself once he grasped the sincerity of her objections.' She was 'disgusted' with Miles for 'slavering' over her hair, 'but since she could not stop him, she resigned herself--that was the way he was, and his enjoyment could not harm her. This inability to feel outrage was of course her undoing.' And there is its, the leitmotif of McCarthy's later account of why she had let 'this old ogre,' Edmund Wilson, steal her away in the first place: 'It was like that thing in law [Martha reflects], where if you let somebody cross your property without hindrance, they finally secure a right of way'....

A Charmed Life is a continuation of marriage to Edmund Wilson by other means. Even the novel's flashback to Miles and Martha's breakup is lifted almost verbatim from a deposition McCarthy filed in *Wilson vs. Wilson*, testifying to her husband's cruelty. The actual deposition describes a showdown in the summer of 1944, when Mary and Edmund were cleaning up after a party they had just given for about eighteen guests: 'Everybody had gone home and I was washing dishes. I asked [Edmund] if he would empty the garbage. He said, "Empty it yourself." I started carrying out two large cans of garbage. As I went through the screen door, he made an ironical bow, repeating, "Empty it yourself." I slapped him--not terribly hard--went out and emptied the cans, then went upstairs. He called me and I came down. He got up from the sofa and took a terrible swing and hit me in the face and all over. He said: "You think you're unhappy with me. Well, I'll give you something to be unhappy about." I ran out of the house and jumped into my car.'

In the novel, McCarthy redistributes the blame: 'Their penultimate quarrel...had exploded in the middle of the night, after a party, when she was carrying two overflowing pails of garbage and he refused, with a sardonic bow, to hold open the screen door for her. There she was, manifestly the injured party, but instead of leaving it at that, and taxing him with it the next day, when he was weakened with a hangover, she immediately distributed the guilt by setting down one pail of garbage and slapping him'."

Carol Brightman
Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World
(Clarkson Potter 1992) 245-51

"The timeline of the novel is...determined by the hormonal ebb and flow of the main character, a fact in fiction if there ever was one. But the pregnancy itself is the result of deception, in the sense that Martha Sinnott has 'deceived' her husband, and also possibly the occasion for more deception, as she tries to decide whether to abort this fetus or whether to go on and have the baby without telling her husband that it may not be his. Childbirth is again linked to sexual deception in *The Company She Keeps*, this time to the infidelity of the husband, Jim Barnett in 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man'...

The doctor reassures Martha Sinnott with the statistical probability that the baby is her husband's, though he admits that it is impossible to be completely certain... Martha's own sense of obligation to the truth thus becomes both overintellectual ('You think too much; that's the trouble with you,' the doctor tells her) and dangerous. Her unwillingness to live a lie and deceive her husband for the remainder of their life together is what may lead her to interrupt the pregnancy and put her own life at risk in a dangerous and illegal abortion. Medicine, in the person of the doctor, and biological reality, in the form of the pregnancy, are thus arrayed on the side of falsehood. Wives routinely present their husbands with babies conceived in adultery; husbands routinely commit adultery when their wives are in the hospital having babies. And everybody's happy, and it's the manly thing to do. Human reproduction, as basic a 'fact' as death, is the occasion for deception and lifelong lies."

Perri Klass

"The Stink of Father Zossima: The Medical Fact in Mary McCarthy's Fiction"
Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy (1996) 112-13

"McCarthy's most detailed study of who and what Edmund Wilson was to her is her 1955 novel *A Charmed Life*.... 'The novel is supposed to be about doubt. All the characters in different ways represent doubt.' Does the fact that McCarthy came to disdain the book mean that she had not succeeded in her purposes or that she had succeeded too uncomfortably well?...What she could not admit, from a male-identified perspective, is the underlying issue of doubt which the novel examines: the doubt that females can claim successfully both personal and professional autonomy. In her portrayal of Martha, McCarthy demonstrates not only that breaking with a mentor--when the relationship is complicated by sexuality--becomes the exorcising of a demon...

The central truth about *A Charmed Life* is that the segment of McCarthy's life that it depicts involves her wresting herself free from the shadow of Edmund Wilson. She was free of him legally as her second husband in October 1945, after having left him on a summer night in 1944 when he made fun of her and came to blows with her as she carried out two heavy pails of garbage from a party they had just given.... In her typical roman a clef style, McCarthy 'populated' *A Charmed Life* with characters from her own history. Edmund Wilson becomes Miles Murphy, the novel's overpowering antagonist. Bowden Broadwater, who became McCarthy's third husband in December 1946, is second husband John Sinnott in the novel. The essential characteristics of the two men are carried over intact from biography to fiction, and the essential point of the plot carries over just as readily, too. Why does a woman move back with her new husband to a small, rarified community where she had lived with her former husband when that former husband and his new wife still live there? The answer is apparent in any western novel or film: she has a score to settle. She has come back for a showdown.

Mary McCarthy was always a savvy survivor even though she was not always willing to explore her own motives. She is on record as not wanting to marry Wilson, as never even having loved him. In *Intellectual Memoirs* she is surprised at the end of her life to notice how fondly disposed she had once been toward him.... The description of Miles Murphy toward the beginning of *A Charmed Life* indicates that 'he had a brilliant mind...educated by the Jesuits...on to Heidelberg and the Sorbonne and the London School of Economics. Miles has even studied with Jung at Zurich and has excelled in a variety of fields--as a playwright, a boxer 'who used to work out with Hemingway,' a magazine editor, a psychologist, 'a practicing mystic,' an amateur analyst, and an adventure story writer. This stands in stark contrast to the dilettantism of most inhabitants of New Leeds, but it is an apt parallel to Edmund Wilson.

His career, like McCarthy's spanned more than fifty years--the 1920s to the 1970s. He began as a reporter and literary journalist and went on to write literary, art, and social criticism; he wrote on popular culture, on 'the lively arts,' on history--both modern and ancient; he did travel books, fiction, poetry, and

drama (Castronovo 305). John Muste calls Wilson unquestionably the United States' best known and most respected critic and its only genuine man of letters.'

This range and its particular specialties bear an eerie resemblance to the career McCarthy carved and the freelancing, wide-ranging role she sought in American letters. *Newsweek* named her in 1963 our 'only real woman of letters' (Hanscom 83). The true thematic scheme at work in *A Charmed Life* demonstrates the birth struggle of the McCarthy-identified protagonist to free herself from the tutelage and tentacles of the intellectual giant responsible for her literary gestation. The underlying tone of the book conveys the screams and struggles of a sailor's descent into a maelstrom, and we readers, unable to affect the outcome, call from the shore, 'Why did you sail into those waters?' Martha Sinnott's answer is that she is 'afraid of being afraid' and therefore must sail straight into the deepest, fiercest part of her ocean. Sinnott deems 'the hardest course' to be 'the right one,' sees that equation as 'an almost invariable law.' Her rule is that if 'her nature shrank from the task, if it hid piteously and cried for mercy, that was a sign that she was in the presence of the ethical.'

The ethical within the immediate context of the quote refers to the abortion she has decided she must require of herself. She has been trying to have a baby--her covert operation in coming to New Leeds--though the overt one, according to her husband John, is for her to finish writing her play. Now after one erring evening with Miles, she cannot be sure of her child's paternity. By engaging sexually with Miles, she has acted out the ultimate relocking of horns between two madly ambitious career *litterateurs*. Miles/Wilson has made fertile the intellect, the literary output, and finally the womb of the Martha/McCarthy protagonist. To bear his seed attaches her to him permanently. And it is her attachment to Miles --psychically and professionally--that causes Martha's inner turmoil throughout the book.

Moments before her death, Martha Sinnott, driving home from her neighbors with the money for the abortion in her purse, realizes that 'she could trust herself' because 'she was no longer afraid of herself' and sees her newfound trust and courage as 'the reward of [her] fearsome decision' to exorcise Miles from her life through the abortion. Such a passage, when transferred to an autobiographical context, shows McCarthy painfully dominated by Wilson's presence in her life. But to say he overwhelmed her at times is not to say that she did not seek out what he had to offer--to her female ego and to her career.... The singular truth on which *A Charmed Life* is based: Wilson promised her achievement. McCarthy recognized that to marry him would 'do something' for her, for her 'literary gift'... Self-knowledge eludes her because although she 'readily admits to vanity, cruelty, selfishness, betrayal, competitiveness, [and] showing off,' she hesitates to admit to 'ambition' (Strouse17). She also hesitates to admit that Miles Murphy represents Edmund Wilson. She warns readers that the novel's antagonist 'must not be taken for a disguised portrait of Wilson,' but concedes that Martha resembles *her* pretty closely....

The real stake of *A Charmed Life* keeps the McCarthy protagonist 'in the presence of the ethical.' The reader, however, can hardly be content with the limited artistry that an isolated sexual encounter and the ethical crisis that arises from it demonstrate if the story lacks significance otherwise. But the story signifies strikingly McCarthy's remaining conflicted about this novel and the Edmund Wilson chapter of her life indicates how much of her sense of self as female and as literary artist lies 'buried' in it. *A Charmed Life* is another version of McCarthy's *Bildungsroman*. McCarthy could be as carelessly snobbish with her readership as with the characters she 'wrote up.' She expected to change some minor features of Wilson and have both her own circle, the intelligentsia, and her wider audience accept her denial of the Miles/Wilson identification without further question."

Avis Hewitt

"The Minotaur as Mentor: Edmund Wilson's Role in the Career of Mary McCarthy"
Twenty-Four Ways (1996) 158-64

"*A Charmed Life*...told the story of Martha Sinnott, a pretty young actress and aspiring playwright who returns with her young husband to the scene of her disastrous first marriage. Seven years have passed since Martha's scandalous departure, in her nightgown, in the dead of night. Mile Murphy, Martha's former husband, is living fifteen miles down the road, with a new wife and baby. A sometime philosopher and lay analyst, older and overbearing, Miles Murphy is the author of one highly successful commercial play....

With *A Charmed Life* Mary McCarthy finally got right the Cape satire she had started to write in the summer of 1945. By stating at the very outset that the villagers of New Leeds were living under a strange enchantment, she immediately darkened her fictional landscape. This time, failed writers were not the sole subject of her scrutiny. Her eye lingered long over Warren Coe, a former art instructor who is trying to introduce fission into his painting and who has a fatal fascination with the life of the mind, a fascination that takes the form of constantly asking 'Why not?' and 'Why?' She made fast work of Coe's rich and lazy but imperious wife, who serves guests their drinks in paper cups, substitutes toilet paper for napkins and withholds the news of the death of her husband's mother when it threatens to interfere with the dinner party. In her spare time, McCarthy literally brought before the bar the incorrigible Sandy Gray, a sometime art critic and full-time philanderer, who fancies himself a free spirit and refuses to pay a penny of child support. (The hapless Coes owed not a little to Gardner and Ruth Jencks, loyal friends whose son, Charlie, was close to Reuel; Sandy Gray bore a passing resemblance to a dashing local by the name of Jack Phillips.)

The author's victims were dispatched with scarcely a whimper and with no little merriment. If her touch was light, it could not be said to be kind. Writing of Dolly Lamb, the shy and unmarried painter who lives down the hill from the Sinnotts, she described her as 'curiously flattened out, like a cloth doll that had been dressed and redressed by many imperious mistresses.' When Sandy Gray dismisses the delicate still lifes Dolly Lamb paints, he says, 'It's your own shit you're assembling there, in neat, constipated little packages'.... (Dolly Lamb, of course, was Mary Meigs.)...

At its best, McCarthy's Cape novel feels as if she has transported the cast of *The School for Scandal* to a dark New England forest where Hawthorne himself might not feel ill at ease. For much of the time, her characters, with their self-delusions and social pretensions, float clear of her sinister setting. Of all her novels, *A Charmed Life* seemed to best reflect the spirit, if not the direct influence, of Bowden Broadwater. *A Charmed Life* has the verve or the delicious bitchiness of social satire, but, above all, it is the story of Martha Sinnott's undoing. Martha believes that she is different. Hubris has brought her back to the village where she lived with her former husband. Hubris, bad luck, and a bit too much alcohol land her in the arms of Miles Murphy. Sheer momentum carries the narrative through the reading of Racine's *Berenice* and on to a rape that is at once brutal and comic when seen through Murphy's small green bloodshot eyes...

With this rape on a sofa much like the one she herself owned, she seemed to have strayed into her former husband's fictional territory and then, not content with that, slipped into his very shoes. If you remember nothing else from the novel, you will remember Martha on that Empire sofa. The trouble is, even at the moment of Martha's undoing, the writer's tone is so insouciant that later, when Martha discovers that she is pregnant and has no idea whether Murphy or Sinnott is the father, it seems at first no more than another twist in the increasingly complicated plot. It is hard to believe that Martha is seriously debating whether to pass the baby off as her husband's or to get an abortion. In New Leeds, after all, it is so easy to say, 'Why not?' And when Martha chooses the abortion and the sinister forces that lurk in the dark woods of New Leeds are at last unleashed, the reader is taken aback....

John Updike: 'I am offended by most novels that end with the violent death of the central figure. Maybe the Russians could pull that off, but in Mary McCarthy's world somehow heroines don't die that way. Martha's death in a senseless car crash on her way to the abortionist can seem less like some terrible cosmic irony or the end of a dark modern fairy tale than a writer working against her own grain.'

James Merrill: 'She wouldn't ever, even as a novelist I guess, begin to envision what it might be like to die. If she killed someone off, it was fast. The end of *A Charmed Life* is a sort of Nabokovian stroke--the lady novelist advancing on the last page, kills the heroine.'

Forever after, Mary McCarthy would present the argument that Martha's death proves that Martha is mortal and not living under an enchantment. But for some readers she could never dispel a lingering sense that her ending was improvised or high-handed. She was no Russian and Martha Sinnott was no Anna Karenina. If her letters to Hannah Arendt are to be taken at face value, at the time she was writing the novel, she was devoting more of her attention to the poor excuse for thinking endemic to the natives of New Leeds than to the fate of her poor heroine....

A Charmed Life...came out in the fall of 1955. From *The New York Times* it received a splendid daily review. From the bulk of the critics, however, it received the sort of mixed but slightly acid response that she had grown to expect. Even John Chamberlain, who had always made it a point to give her the benefit of the doubt, did not see fit to spare her this time round."

Frances Kiernan
Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy
(Norton 2000) 372-76, 380

Michael Hollister (2020)