

ANALYSIS

Cast a Cold Eye (1950)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"It seems to me to have dated horribly since its publication, to be over-literary, gushy, and (frankly) hysterical. If I had it to do over again, I should turn the story into a rather gruesome comedy, objectify both the heroine and the husband more, and make the whole thing a study in absurdity.... I am sensible, of course to the fact that 'The Weeds' is, or was, the most popular of the stories.... Bowden thinks as I do, in fact even more strongly; he calls it a waterfall or a running faucet and cannot imagine that any treatment would have made it better."

Mary McCarthy
Letter to Bernice Baumgarten
(19 October 1948)

"Miss McCarthy's eye is cold indeed and almost surgically sharp; and while the object of its merciless contemplation may be a fictional Francis Cleary or an actual grandmother remembered, the reader has a feeling of being watched, and just as coldly, himself."

Dudley Fitts
The New York Times Book Review
(24 September 1950)

"Whoever thought the Yeats quotation appropriate is guilty of an understatement, for Miss McCarthy casts a distinctly jaundiced eye on all the characters who pass before her including--and this is her saving grace--herself."

Robert Halsband
Saturday Review of Literature
(7 October 1950)

"The title, borrowed from Yeats's epitaph, part of the later, rather than theatrical, pose of an old poet who never cast a cold eye at anything in his life, is not fitting, affixed to the work of a young woman part of whose maturing equipment should be warmth. An emotional factor, by a paradox, must exist even in satire, lest analysis become so neat, and rational judgment so detached, that they shrink to rather mean proportions everything they touch."

Louise Bogan
The New Republic
(27 November 1950)

"Certain themes in the first book are repeated in *Cast a Cold Eye* (1950), a collection of four stories and three early versions of chapters of her *Memories*. In 'The Weeds' is treated somberly, and in 'The Friend of the Family' with bitter humor, the sort of marriage seen in 'Ghostly Father.' It is the marriage that destroys the individual's integrity, his troublesome loyalty to the truth of his own nature. 'The Old Men,' less successful than the other two but interesting for its meanings, tells how a young man who has long been uncertain of his own identity comes to feel that the self is no more than a '*point du depart*' for 'impersonations,' and that reality, the actual, is 'pornography' and so to be avoided. At this, 'blithe and ready to live, selfishly and inconsiderately,' he sings out the Yeats epigraph which gives the book its title, and shortly afterward, as if for want of any reason to live, he abruptly dies. It thus appears that the 'cold eye' which reviewers have generally supposed the author means as her own is meant in fact to describe what she most reprobates, that indifference to what is outside the self which deprives the self of reality and makes life pointless."

Irvin Stock
Mary McCarthy

(U Minnesota 1968)

Michael Hollister (2020)