

## ANALYSIS

"Ghostly Father, I Confess" (1942)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"In 'Ghostly Father, I Confess' the attempt to find the key that works the self is more deliberate [than in 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt']. The title comes from a fifteenth-century anonymous religious lyric prefaced to the story. The allusion to the Father-Confessor of the Roman Catholic Church is ironic. In the secular world Margaret Sargent inhabits, the priest-confessor has been replaced by the psychoanalyst. And it is to him that Margaret Sargent must now confess...

To the reader of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, much of the information in 'Ghostly Father, I Confess' that has to do with the childhood of Margaret Sargent is repetitious. Only some changes in names and setting have occurred.... The lines of autobiography emerge clearly. In this episode, Margaret Sargent is financially secure, for she is married unhappily to a successful but domineering architect.... It was the ugly cartoon of middle-class life that she detested... Also she no longer believes herself indestructible...

Her sessions with the analyst indicate a means of salvation, a 'key' that will explain her behavior. Her marriage to Frederick, Dr. James counsels, is a re-enactment of certain childhood relationships, and he advises her to win her freedom from Frederick as she had won her freedom from her father and her aunt. After the session ends, she walks down Madison avenue, remembering a dream that she had started to tell the analyst. In the dream, she was at an outing cabin with two other girls...and 'three tall young men, all of them a sort of dun color, awkward, heavy-featured, without charm, a little like the pictures of Nazi prisoners...' When one of the young men approached her, she became animated and flirtatious despite her resolve to take no part in the evening's 'fun' and told one of the girls: 'Really he is not so bad as the others. He is quite interesting when you begin to talk to him.' But, when he kissed her coarsely and brutishly, she looked up and saw that his handsomeness had disappeared. Then, as she watched, he once again metamorphosed into a Byron-like figure: 'When he kissed her this time, she kept her eyes shut, knowing very well what she would see if she opened them, knowing that it was now too late, for now she wanted him, anyway.'

The dream, she realizes, is significant--'it was some failure in self-love that obliged her to snatch blindly at the love of others, hoping to love herself through them, borrowing their feelings, as the moon borrowed light. She herself was a dead planet.' And she sees that the Nazi prisoner and the Byronic imposter are parts of her own equivocal nature. But at least, she consoles herself, she is still able to detect her own frauds; she had been able to know, even with her eyes closed, when the young Nazi had ceased to be Lord Byron. She prays to be allowed to return the ability to see with an inner spiritual eye and asks to be preserved in this disunity between flesh and spirit.... [O ye Gods, grant me this in return for my piety]. The favor she asks is small, 'but like Catullus, she could not be too demanding, for, unfortunately, she did not believe in God.'

Barbara McKenzie  
*Mary McCarthy*  
(Twayne 1966) 92-94

"The five stories assume full meaning only in the sixth, 'Ghostly Father, I Confess.' Here, terrible (and often funny) humiliations in one love and one bed after another culminate. Here the earlier, sometimes shocking encounters are melted down to a general truth. Love, men and marriage are reduced to the lowest denominator of frankness and common sense, a position they are to maintain throughout all of Mary McCarthy's subsequent work. But, contrary to a widely-held view...this denigratory process does not...elevate the female... By a reverse process the female in Mary McCarthy is not elevated to princess, but instead fragmented, her personality shattered, by her contact with the male. In no other place is this as clear

as in 'Ghostly Father, I Confess,' when Meg Sargent's arrogance and egoism (always, I think, offered ironically) are brought low, to the hysteria and confusion of the psychiatrist's couch....

'Ghostly Father, I Confess'...serves retrogressively to illumine the other five. Here the method and the content of the stories are justified. The unnamed heroine of 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment' has no past; here she is provided with one, and brings her terrible history into her own consciousness and ours, not so much in what she says to her 'confessor,' the psychiatrist, but in what she allows her own mind to deal with silently during the session. A *New York Times* reviewer of this book suggested that what was wrong with Meg was that 'her perspective was distorted' and that her temperament was 'diseased and self-destroying.' While it might somehow be possible to see this final story as revelatory of mental illness it is not the answer that Mary McCarthy gives in the story.

During the hour that Meg lies on the couch, we are permitted to watch a woman whose childhood has scarred her ruinously, whose intelligence has failed at this time to save her, whose maturity is finally being reached only at the cost of her permanent abandonment of any hope of a unified personality. What is wrong with her seems not so much to be mental distortion or disease but a realistic if painfully achieved maturity, perhaps true to some extent of all human beings confronted with breakdown who end by accepting a 'cure' which is less than the whole self.

Early in the confession Meg tells of a dream, of when she was seventeen and went to an outing cabin owned by her college. Then, breaking off, she launches into an ingenious literary attack on the psychiatrist, Dr. James. Clearly, at this moment, Meg is trying to substitute her recognized, clever, literary self for the ones she knows lie next to it. She is avoiding self-conviction in this way; eventually she must come to that. Completely unstrung, she cries on the couch even while she is capable of foreseeing and predicting Dr. James' questions and conclusions. Meg dissects herself ("Ah,' she thought, 'thank God for the mind, the chart, the compass") and finds only confusion ("You have got everything upside down,' her husband told her"), nameless grief, revolt against the 'ugly cartoon of middle-class life,' and 'the middle-class tragedy' of her orphaned childhood. She goes over her own unsavory immediate past--the affairs, the wreck of her marriage--she brings her 'skeptical prosaic intelligence' to bear upon the moral and psychical crises of her life, and as the psychiatrist talks she reviews her own state of near-hysteria.

She realizes that she began to collapse soon after her first marriage and that only temporarily had she been reprieved by divorce. Again and again, in other 'relationships' the crying jags recur, the sense of being trapped returns in her second marriage. Always she has escaped, moved on, but now, brought finally to the couch, and under the psychiatrist's prodding, she acknowledges that she is now conquered, 'overrun by barbarian tribes,' who may be the men she has known. The psychiatrist ends the hour by assuring her she can get back her 'rights' of decision, either to leave her husband or be reconciled to him, by the use of her two 'weapons,' her mind and her beauty. Only after she has left his office, preening herself on his reference to her beauty, wondering if he...? does she recall the end of her dream, in which three dun-colored heavy-featured tall young men, 'like the pictures of Nazi prisoners,' accompanied by two low-class girls, invade the outing cabin and a party begins.

She flirts with one of the men, who then metamorphoses into a handsome, Byronic, sensitive fellow (suddenly wholly acceptable). He kisses her, she keeps her eyes closed against his beastliness, and the extremity to which she has been brought sweep over her: 'It was some failure in self-love of others, hoping to love herself through them...' Finally she acknowledges the truth about herself, that for her the failures of blind flesh can only be rescued by the perception of the spirit, that she can survive only if she does not yearn fruitlessly for total assimilation of her indigestible experience, for perfect unity of her fragmented self. The story ends on a classical note. Like the hero of *The Groves of Academe*, who brings the last scene in that novel to a close by quoting a famous line from a Ciceronian oration, Meg quotes Catullus. An unbeliever, she prays for her survival on these new terms of disunity: '*O di, reddite me hoc pro pietate mea* [O gods, render this to me in return for my devotion].'

In this highly introspective and touching story Mary McCarthy has thrown all autobiographical caution to the winds. Her honesty is absolute and painful. The variety of self that is Meg Sargent is irrevocably tied to her self-knowledge. She reveals her deep, if partial, resentment of men, she displays her tendency to

sexual puritanism ('that dirty fornication in the hotel room'), she does continuous penance for the wayward acts of her young life that seem to have come about out of a need for freedom, like a trapped animal that hurts itself terribly in its efforts to escape a trap, because of her 'festering conscience.' She realizes the true nature of the self is to be unknown, unapproachable, and chameleonlike, and that one of the values of the search for self lies in the meanders of incidental, colorful social encounters, so that in the process of running Meg to ground we, as well as she, end by discovering Mr. Sheer, Pflaumen, Jim Barnett, and the long-suffering wrong-headed Dr. James.

Critics have both admired and been hard on this book, divided as to its value. Malcolm Cowley said the book was not likeable; John Chamberlain saw it as 'a judgment on the playgirl as a romantic revolutionary,' while Charles Eisinger thought quite the opposite, that 'nothing was on trial, not middle-class society, not the liberated intellectual personality, not even womankind itself.' Chamberlain thought the book possessed 'a scientific, unflagging curiosity about sex,' like Kinsey's, he adds, and in addition 'a pitiless insistence on seeing everything.' Mary McCarthy's 'admirable intelligence' is 'without imaginative depth or emotional profundity,' he claims; he ends by accusing her of the same charge she brought against Barnett: 'deficiency of imagination.'

Some critics were deceived by the purposeful disjointedness of the method of dealing with the subject into thinking that the book resulted in 'discontinuity and lack of cumulative effect.' Some agreed that the tone of the book was 'malicious,' or 'spiteful'; a few found it witty, others just 'sharp,' and 'lacking in charity.' Perhaps the unkindest review of all (as it turned out, the one least characterized by acumen) came from Clifton Fadiman, then the book reviewer for *The New Yorker*. He lumped the book into a portmanteau review with Franz Werfel's *Song of Bernadette* ('fascinating') and a book called *A Little Lower Than the Angels* ('a first novel written with passion and a sense of style'). In contrast, he found Mary McCarthy's first novel to have 'the definite attraction of high-grade, back-fence gossip.' Meg was 'characterless, the familiar type that Pearl Harbor has, let us hope, dated completely.' And then he delivered the *coup de grace* in a tone of flat, papal infallibility: 'Mary McCarthy is no novelist.'

One of Fadiman's critical tenets, apparently, that if it is possible to recognize a part or a whole of a character the novel is therefore valueless, is echoed by the critic of *The New Republic* at the time, who criticized the book for revealing too much about its author. Her treatment of Jim Barnett, he claimed, was 'self-castigatory.' She despised the liberal journalist because she knew him too well and his middle-class opinions were essentially her own. Fadiman's further error, confusing the search for unity for *lack* of it in her characters, is shared by a number of critics, but he goes on to further confusion by deciding that her talent is wholly lacking in creative force. Her only talent is 'for dissecting people and leaving a nasty mess on the table.' There *is* a mess left on the psychiatrist's couch, but it is touching, revelatory, open, honest and self-denigratory. It is rather a notable fictional treasure hunt--the search for the self amid all the welter of appearances, pretense, and human contact."

Doris Grumbach  
*The Company She Keeps*  
(Coward-McCann 1967) 95

"In the last story 'Ghostly Father, I Confess,' after five years of an unhappy second marriage to an architect apparently congenial but really authoritarian and unimaginative, Margaret is spending an hour on a psychoanalyst's couch. She has been sent by her husband, who is fed up with the way she uses her 'wonderful scruples as an excuse for acting like a bitch.' And now, though she disapproves of psychoanalysis, whose conclusions can never be proved wrong since all disagreement is mere resistance, and considers her doctor a limited man, she finds herself drawn into an agonizing search for the cause of her misery and bad behavior, for it is also a search for the 'meaning' that will redeem her life from 'gibberish.' The story is crammed with the up-welling, emotion-charged facts of her life--from the childhood passed between her father's rationalism and her aunt's vulgarities to the second marriage, in which she feels herself suffocating amid such stylish middle-class culture-objects as 'her white pots of ivy, her Venetian blinds, her open copy of a novel by Kafka...each in its own patina of social anxiety.' Miss McCarthy seems to have thrown boldly into the story the whole confusion of her own life. Yet it moves with a nightmarish coherence amid the chaos, and, in fact, what she understands at the end makes the story a unity and a fitting conclusion to the book's whole development.

The story is about the pressure on Margaret Sargent to accept the life of the intellectually sophisticated middle class which she detests. And for that life she is now to be made fit by a mode of 'therapy' which is presented as the most insidious of all its ways of avoiding reality. The object of the therapy is to perform a 'perfectly simple little operation.' First the consciousness is put to sleep by 'the sweet, optimistic laughing-gas of science (you are not bad, you are merely unhappy...poor Hitler is a paranoiac, and that dirty fornication in a hotel room, why, that, dear Miss Sargent, is a 'relationship').' Then the doctor cuts out 'the festering conscience, which was of no use to you at all, and was only making you suffer.' But to have a conscience is to remain aware of what is outside one's own wishes, that is, of a difference between truth, however painful, and lies, however gratifying. Under the pressure of the idea that she is unhappy merely because she is ill, 'her own sense of truth was weakening. This and her wonderful scruples were all she had in the world, and they were slipping away.' And it is this that makes her most miserable. She can't behave as she should, but not to know when she does evil, and not to mind, is to lose her grip on reality and to shrink from a healthy adult into an invalid or a child.

The story ends with an apparent inconclusiveness that is really, as I have said, a sufficient conclusion, both to the story and the book. She is almost persuaded by her doctor that she can be good and free and strong inside her marriage, which is to say, that all can yet be well at no painful cost, when she remembers a dream she had begun to tell him earlier. In this dream she had enabled herself to accept the embraces of a Nazi type by pretending that he was really rather Byronic. As she walks away from the doctor's office, feeling the hateful expected tug of an attraction to him, she suddenly understands the dream. It has told her that all will not be well, that unable to love herself except through the love of men, she will again seek a new love to rescue her from past failures and will again snatch at it blindly and perhaps unscrupulously. But though in the dream she pretended the Nazi was a Byron, 'she could still detect her own frauds. At the end of the dream, her eyes were closed, but the inner eye had remained alert.... 'Oh my God,' she said...'do not let them take this away from me. If the flesh must be blind, let the spirit see. Preserve me in disunity'.

Thus is completed the 'one story' of Margaret Sargent. Beginning as a manipulator and falsifier of reality, she is now its true lover, who would rather suffer than pretend and whose suffering, because it means the clarity of mind to see the truth and the courage to face it, is the measure of a new dignity."

Irvin Stock  
Mary McCarthy  
(U Minnesota 1968) 18-20

"In 'Ghostly Father, I Confess,' Margaret is again a wife desiring a divorce, as she was at the beginning. The point of view is Margaret's, and the story is an account of a session with Dr. James; its substance is partly their conversation, partly Margaret's thoughts. All of her fragmented selves respond to Dr. James. Margaret the role player wants to impress him and keeps trying to catch in his eyes 'an expression of disapproval, of astonishment or regret--anything but that kindly neutrality.' Margaret the snob analyzes her analyst and finds him wanting. 'She would spend half a session trying to show him, say, that a man they both knew was a ridiculous character, that a movie they had both seen was cheap. And it would be hopeless, absolutely hopeless, for he *was* that man, he *was* that movie.' Margaret the *femme fatale* preens herself because he compliments her: '*He likes me the best.*' But Margaret the self-doubter rejects his compliments as a 'therapeutic lie.'

Her husband, Frederick, an architect, has 'done what the modern, liberal man inevitably does--called in an expert' to deal with his difficult wife. Margaret wants to leave him, but the tyrannical and overbearing Frederick will not allow it. He accuses her of using her 'wonderful scruples' as an excuse for 'acting like a bitch.' Dr. James murmurs about 'early religious training' and 'moral standards that nobody could live up to.' Margaret feels that her most valued attributes--her sense of truth and her scruples--are slipping away under a double attack.

Margaret and Dr. James look to her childhood for explanations of her unhappiness. In deference to her dead mother's Catholicism, her father had entrusted her upbringing to her mother's sister, Aunt Clara, who created in his house a grim, ascetic, joyless life for his daughter; thus Margaret was the 'Catholic child of a Protestant father, the shabby daughter of a prosperous lawyer, the underbred Irish offspring of a genteel

New England parent.' Eventually the aunt was overthrown--Margaret loses her faith--and a new girl emerged, pretty, well dressed, and remarkable only for an 'air of coming from nowhere.' After years of marveling over her escape, Margaret found during her first marriage that she was not free at all, that in her furious outbursts against her husband she was 'exactly like Aunt Clara.' Now in her second marriage she is, Dr. James tells her, reenacting her childhood. Frederick, who is older than Margaret, is both the tyrannical Aunt Clara and the apparently indifferent father.

Leaving Dr. James's office, Margaret remembers a dream she never finished telling him. She was in a cabin on an outing, part of her orientation at Eggshell College, along with some 'low-class' girls and three young men of 'a sort of dun color, awkward, heavy-featured, without charm, a little like the pictures of Nazi prisoners....' She flirts with one, and his appearance is transformed. He kisses her, but when she looks up, she sees that he is once again like the others. Again, his face refines, but when he kisses her this time she keeps her eyes closed, 'knowing very well what she would see if she opened them.'

It was only a dream. Yet she cannot 'disown' the dream or its self-accusation: 'It was she who was the Nazi prisoner, the pseudo-Byron, the equivocal personality who was not truly protean but only appeared so. And yet, she thought, walking on, she could still detect her own frauds. At the end of the dream, her eyes were closed, but the inner eye remained alert.' The story ends with a prayer--'If the flesh must be blind, let the spirit see. Preserve me in disunity'--and the admission that she cannot be 'too demanding, for unfortunately, she did not believe in God.'

A former Catholic, Margaret frequently thinks in religious terms. With Mr. Breen, she was pleased by the paradox that her act of sacrifice required mortification of the flesh through the act of pleasure, and she startlingly imagined her naked body as a 'slab of white lamb on an altar.' Ashamed of her Trotskyist outburst at Pflaumen's party, she judges her own a greater blasphemy than Peter's: 'social pressure...made Peter deny the Master,' but made her affirm him. It was 'the difference between plain and fancy cowardice.' Her Catholic upbringing has provided a metaphoric language, but she has no faith, and the 'ghostly father' to whom she confesses is just the pragmatic Dr. James.

Margaret is nonetheless answerable to truth and to her scruples, which deprive her of comfort she might take in right action. Politically, she supports the cause of the downtrodden, but she judges herself harshly for it. 'The truth was that...her proletarian sympathies constituted a sort of snub that she administered to the middle class, just as a really smart woman will outdress her friends by relentlessly underdressing them. Scratch a socialist and you find a snob.'

Snob though she is, Margaret lacks discrimination; aloof and superior, she is yet susceptible to the most unsuitable men. Dr. James is another version of Mr. Breen, through whom Margaret hoped to learn something about herself. Ending the session positively, he encourages Margaret to free herself with her mind, adding, 'That and your beauty are the two weapons you have.' Self-consciously preparing to leave, Margaret thinks, 'my beauty,' and 'Well, well!' On the street she sees her folly: even if Dr. James does 'like' her 'the best,' he is still a 'fussy, methodical young man whom she would never ordinarily have looked at.'

Yet what she 'ordinarily' does has yielded a 'divorce, three broken engagements, a whole series of love affairs abandoned *in medias res*,' and a second unhappy marriage. Margaret habitually and unselectively seeks masculine attention, but when she enjoys a little victory over the conventional Aunt Clara, it is on Aunt Clara's terms. Recalling her words--'It doesn't pay to let men think you're easy'--Margaret smiles to herself 'patronizingly' because she is going to tell Aunt Clara that she is getting married again. In her horror of spinsterhood, her flirtation with Erdman, her 'affairs' with Jim Barnett and Mr. Breen, Margaret reveals the depth of self-doubt that is inadequately disguised by her superior and unconventional manner, but she reveals it even more clearly in her attitude toward getting married. She wants to be--and is equipped to be--her own woman, 'well at ease,' but she keeps yearning toward that conventional happy ending for the conventional woman.

In a 'Foreword' to the novel, McCarthy compares the progress of the novel to a search. Finding the 'ordinary, indispensable self' missing from her 'spiritual pocketbook,' the heroine, accompanied by the

reader, retraces her steps looking for it. 'It is not only scenes and persons but points of view that are revisited--the intimate 'she,' the affectionate diminutive 'you,' the thin, abstract, autobiographical 'I.'"

Margaret and Dr. James practice conventional psychology in seeking the lost identity in the agonized childhood, when one personality followed another without developing from it, but to locate a source is not to solve a problem; and Dr. James's advice to Margaret to win her freedom now as she did then is facile and pointless. He thinks that if she 'wins' her freedom from Frederick, she will not want to use it. This would, to be sure, solve her husband's problem, but freedom, used or unused, will not supply the missing self. The episodes of Margaret's life do not cohere any more than they did in childhood. Mr. Sheer's friend hardly resembles Jim Barnett's 'intense' lover, and neither of them is much like the shallow role player of "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment.'

'Preserve me in disunity,' Margaret prays, having understood the dream that she never told Dr. James. Her susceptibility to 'love' reflects a failure of self-love; she looks to others for an image of herself to love, and in doing so she plays different selves for all the company she keeps. That is why the attentions of Mr. Breen or the praise of Dr. James are at once important and dangerous. That is why she requires an audience. Now, at last, she can see the painful but valuable truth that she avoided at the end of "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment'."

Willene Schaefer Hardy  
*Mary McCarthy*  
(Frederick Ungar 1981) 47-51

"In the last chapter, 'Ghostly Father, I Confess,' Meg finally settles down and marries a bullying architect. Her unhappy situation impels her to a psychiatrist's couch. As a matter of course her childhood, very much like Mary McCarthy's, is resurrected. While in analysis, Margaret Sargent loses her faith in psychiatry. She realizes that it is a false god whose price in the negation of personal responsibility. Psychoanalysis is a 'therapeutic lie,' since its object is to perform a 'perfectly simple little operation,' the putting to sleep of conscience--'you are not bad, you are merely unhappy.' The doctor must remove conscience which enables her to see what is outside her own desires. Not to know what one does wrong and not to care are to lose one's hold on reality and to remain a child. The book ends with Meg's determination to live with the pain of knowing how flawed she is--'preserve me in disunity'--rather than to lose her conscience. The confrontation with the psychiatrist resolves the narrative, as well as the thematic structure of the six parts, because Margaret Sargent, who has set out to find herself, learns that it is more important to accept herself."

Carol Gelderman  
*Mary McCarthy: A Life*  
(St. Martin's 1988) 101-02

"'Ghostly Father, I Confess' is the only one of McCarthy's stories in which she explores the dark side of her personality--'the deeper...the tragic notes,' which, as she later acknowledged, she tried to expunge from the repertoire of her emotions. In the story, she ensures her heroine's candor by identifying Meg with the real-life guardian whose baleful influence over McCarthy's early life always stood as an affront to her vision of herself as a naturally reasonable person.

When the 'usurper' entered Meg Sargent's *second* marriage (as it entered McCarthy's marriage to Edmund Wilson, from the very beginning), Meg is forced to remember how with her 'first husband' she was also 'powerless to intervene when this alien personality would start one of his tirades, or when it would weep and lie in bed in the morning.... And when it began to have love affairs, to go up to strange hotel rooms, and try to avoid the floor clerk, she could only stand by, horrified, like a spectator at a play...who longs to jump on the stage and clear up the misunderstanding, but who composes himself by saying that what is happening is not real, those people are only actors.'

Turning 'those people'--beginning with herself--into characters in fiction presented McCarthy with one way to 'clear up the misunderstanding.' But another significance of these passages lies rather in the facts they acknowledge from McCarthy's personal history, and in the novelty of their interpretation. In "Ghostly Father, I Confess,' she describes Meg's 'incredulity and horror' over the alien patterns in her behavior. Her

first husband had actually consoled her because he shared her horror.... And she wonders, 'What if she were an imposter?' Perhaps the 'false self was...the true one.'

The question is resolved by a twist of logic that leads Meg to produce 'the false self in all its malignancy, [thus] asserting its claim to belief. To say, 'You were wrong about me, look how dreadfully I can treat you, and do it not compulsively, but calmly, in the full possession of my faculties.' She announces her decision to marry another man; her husband 'had grieved over her and let her go, remarking only that her fiancé would never understand her as he did, that she must be out of her senses.' Afterward, she experiences remorse, observing that her first husband's wounds are healed by time, while her own, being self-inflicted, continue to trouble her: 'There are other girls in the world, but there is only the single self... [T]he betrayer is always the debtor....'

'Ghostly Father, I Confess' was written during a period of lacerating self-doubt, after Mary McCarthy had entered into a marriage, with Edmund Wilson, that in certain respects reproduced the searing conditions of her childhood in Minneapolis. Wilson, as we shall see, could be both possessive and tyrannical. When McCarthy married him in 1938, she reenacted something of the trauma of orphanhood: she broke with former friends, quit her first real job, and retired with him to his rented cottage in Stamford, Connecticut, where she promptly became pregnant. Moreover, when McCarthy herself rebelled against these conditions, which were no more tolerable for being self-imposed, Wilson, unlike Harold Johnsrud, regarded her hysterical outbursts as the behavior of a neurotic woman. Mary McCarthy had not come to agree with him, but she could not deny the fact that she was undergoing psychiatric treatment. And by the early 1940s, as 'Ghostly Father, I Confess' attests, she was struggling with the possibility that the eternal villain--Wilson, Myers, Margaret--was also the scapegoat; and that she herself continued to give this figure authority over her life, and to settle for an outraged innocence instead of the more arduous challenge of defining and defending her own interests.

In the story, the image McCarthy presents of her first husband is no doubt colored by the explosive and still unresolved relationship with her second. Johnsrud must have seemed a lamb next to Wilson. Nor is it likely that in the middle 1930s Mary McCarthy would have regarded her behavior with Harold Johnsrud with anything like the uneasiness she felt for her bohemian past in 1942, when the story was written. In 1936, when she stated seeing John Porter, the Williams graduate who worked for the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, whom she met at a Webster Hall dance while Johnsrud was on the road, she was still 'returnable,' still in circulation--soon to be a gay divorcee."

Carol Brightman

*Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World*  
(Clarkson Potter 1992) 123-25

"'Ghostly Father, I Confess,' was published in *Harper's Bazaar* in the spring of 1942. Reading it, we feel as though we're catching glimpses of McCarthy's disastrous childhood in a fun-house mirror while we're looking at her recent marital history head-on. Some details we have come upon in the depositions for the Wilson separation. Some we have heard from her in interviews. Very little about the marriage, aside from Frederick's profession, seems to have been made up out of whole cloth.

Pinned like some poor broken butterfly to Dr. James's couch, Meg Sargent views her predicament with an amusement so sardonic as to be almost savage. But clever as she is, both she and her creator are on to every one of her tricks. They are also on to the fact that her doctor is not going to provide her with any satisfactory release from the trouble she finds herself in. As long as Dr. James brings to Meg Sargent's analysis the orthodox insights of his profession, she never for an instant relinquishes her skepticism. How, she asks, can she become the creature that Dr. James and Frederick want her to be and still keep that part of her that refuses to say what's politic or to deny the evidence before her very eyes. She never wavers until the end of the session, when Dr. James speaks of her 'mind' and 'beauty' and gives her an extra five minutes....

Both as fiction and as document, the story makes painful reading. Finally, what are we to make of it? If Meg Sargent admits to having hysterical fits, does that mean that Mary McCarthy also had them? Possibly. But, then, she was writing this story knowing Edmund Wilson would be her first reader. In addition, she

was writing it for public consumption when she and Wilson were still very much a couple. Above all, Mary McCarthy, like any good writer, was writing for herself. As she went along, she was trying to discover just how she felt about all that was happening to her heroine. In the process it would be hard not to reflect on what was happening in her own life. Had she, like Margaret Sargent, been altered by her analysis? Had she been beaten down? Had she become some sort of invalid? Was she less inclined to speak her mind? Was she losing the qualities that most defined her?"

Frances Kiernan  
*Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy*  
(Norton 2000) 176-77

"The final story of the book, 'Ghostly Father, I Confess,' does not close the book in a traditional sense, bringing the narrative arc to a conclusion, but instead acts as a final framework, structurally containing the preceding stories. On its own, it seems deceptively simple; of the book's six stories, it has the most contained narrative, following a single, uninterrupted sequence of events, and focuses on a clear interaction, between a woman and her psychiatrist. The reader becomes quickly aware that the two are discussing some of the events of the previous stories, offering a dialogic interrogation that emphasizes Meg's containment. The description itself is couched in terms that draw attention to the way Meg performs a particular role for the psychiatrist.

Explaining one of her dreams, Meg notes, 'I must have dreamed that just to please you. It's custom-made. The womb fantasy'--and in spite of the psychiatrist's plea not to 'worry about what I think,' McCarthy makes it clear that Meg's responses are guided by his expected responses. This is confirmed by small moments throughout the story, such as when Meg 'knew without looking that she had coaxed a smile out of him,' that highlight how her company, to take the words of the title, keeps her identity fixed. It is in this final context that Meg becomes most aware of her own containment, which she frames in terms of movement: 'It was a phrase that came to her lips a dozen times a day.' 'She would find herself hammering her fist on her knees and crying out to herself in a sort of whispered shriek, 'I can't go on, I CANNOT GO ON.' The story then draws the reader's attention back to the lack of narrative movement and asks them to link this to a personal sense of claustrophobia or limitation. With the same metafictional flourish that always characterizes McCarthy's style, however, the discussion within the therapy session turns this theme into a kind of puzzle, as Meg and her psychiatrist try to determine why she feels trapped and limited.

Framing her act of self-representation in the terms of a detective story, Meg imagines that her 'fugitive, criminal self lay hiding in a thicket,' detached from but within her mind or memory. In trying to account for her own identity, she cannot avoid imposing external narrative forms onto it, and although she stubbornly claims to 'reject this middle-class tragedy, this degenerated Victorian novel where I am Jane Eyre or someone in Dickens,' McCarthy makes it clear that the only way Meg can try to understand her identity is by turning it into a story and confining it within a narrative. She recognizes, moreover, the double-bind of this process, where the only way she can understand her identity is through limiting it. This is where McCarthy articulates her clearest resistance to critics yoking personal growth to narrative movement, for as this sequence of stories makes clear, the act of narrating one's own experiences is inherently to limit them. It is for this reason that 'the subject' of childhood 'frightened' both Meg and her doctor: 'it suggested to them that the universe is mechanical, utterly predictable, frozen.'

On the one hand, McCarthy seems to emphasize Meg's own culpability in this act, regardless of any external system. Her psychiatrist observes that she tends to crave being contained in other aspects of her life, noting that it is 'unfortunate that you should have chosen to marry exactly the kind of man who would make you feel most enslaved and helpless.' But Meg links this idea of containment to an external regime, specifically a political one; she recognizes that her situation is like that of 'the small state, racked by internal dissension,' that 'invites the foreign conqueror,' because external regulation and confinement 'is sweeter than responsibility.' Whatever personal judgment this implies, it also suggests that the narratives through which she defines herself are externally enforced. Reflecting on her own process of self-definition, she notes the way that she seems to be playing a part that has been set up for her--'always there was this sense of recognition, this feeling that she was only repeating combinations of words she had memorized long ago' so that she is not able to distinguish between an authentic identity and an imposed one, and she ultimately wonders 'whether the false self was not the true one.'



From this perspective, the tension that McCarthy establishes between novelistic and short story conventions in *The Company She Keeps* worked to emphasize the divisions in Meg's identity--which although apparently singular, is fractured and compressed. The patterned stasis of the stories, culminating in 'Ghostly Father, I Confess,' highlights the extent to which Meg's identity is externally enforced and dependent on containing narrative structures. At the same time, McCarthy uses a style and structure that invites the reader to engage in biographical terms with the text, interrogating the episodes as a kind of detective story, where the culprit is Meg's true identity. But the book concludes with the assertion that there is *no* true identity--that Meg is at once 'the Nazi prisoner, the pseudo-Byron, the equivocal personality who was not truly protean but only appeared so.'

While this epiphany struck many contemporary readers as pessimistic--and McCarthy certainly uses this moment to emphasize that identity is ultimately limited, contained by a process in which the individual is culpable--it also has a more positive aspect. Observing that she has the ability to distinguish between the different narratives she imposes on her life--'she could still distinguish the Nazi prisoner from the English milord'--Meg seems to reflexively suggest that she can exert some control over it through the act of critical awareness, as long as 'the inner eye has remained alert.' Invoking the same kind of critical consciousness that her reviews urged readers to adopt, *The Company She Keeps* asks its readers to at least recognize the way their identity is being corralled by external narrative structures, even if they are unable to avoid this process of containment." [Is she rejecting religion?]

Sam V. H. Reese  
*The Short Story in Midcentury America*  
(Louisiana State University 2017) 84-87

"The therapeutic session consists more of witty sparring than the baring of subconscious feelings. Meg's intellectual familiarity with Freudian thought gives her the distance to smile and tease. Engaged in a sort of chess game of personal revelation, she stays one move ahead of her psychiatrist. She anticipates Freudian interpretation as she starts telling him a dream about matriculating at a school called Eggshell College. 'I must have dreamed that just to please you,' she says to the analyst with a teasing smile. 'It's custom-made. The womb fantasy.' Later, she preempts his discussion of the castration complex by bringing it up before he gets a chance to.

When Meg Sargent launches her social commentary, her judgments and opinions, the psychiatrist refuses to accept them as detached observations of the external world. In retaliation, she satirizes his resistance to her wit in a parody of transference: 'She would spend half a session trying to show him, say, that a man they both knew was a ridiculous character, that a movie they had both seen was cheap. And it would be hopeless, absolutely hopeless, for he *was* that man, he *was* that movie, he was the outing cabin, the Popular Front, the League of American Writers, the *Nation*, the *Liberal*, the *New Republic*.... Colonial wallpaper, money in the bank and two cocktails (or was it one? before dinner' (250-251). Her humor is so effective, her satire so sharp, that Meg Sargent undermines the psychoanalytic process even as she lies on the couch. In the competition for interpretation, the push and pull for control over the narrative that characterizes Meg's relation to the psychiatrist, such a vivid comic perspective gives the victory to her.

In another display of knowledge, Meg Sargent mocks the idea of stream of consciousness: 'Damn my stream of consciousness, her mind said, why must it keep harping on this embarrassing topic?' By comically deflating the idea of stream of consciousness--the central concept that assimilates psychoanalysis into literature--she argues against the idea of a story drifting along a stream of unconscious associations. With her flippant joke on the Freudian version of storytelling she asserts her own control over the narrative."

Katie Roiphe  
"Damn My Stream of Consciousness"  
*Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy*  
(Greenwood 1996) 131-32

Michael Hollister (2020)