

ANALYSIS

The Company She Keeps (1942)



Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"About halfway through I began to think of them as a kind of unified story. The same character kept reappearing, and so on. I decided finally to call it a novel in that it does in a sense tell a story, one story."

Mary McCarthy

"Now about Mary's book. I have read it... When I see you I shall discuss the book exhaustively but until then I want to tell you that it is a splendid thing, clever, poetic and new. In fact I am quite flabbergasted--if that's the right word."

Vladimir Nabokov
Letter to Edmund Wilson
(6 May 1942)

"Mary McCarthy looks like a glamour girl, and writes like a man who has been around for a long time. *The Company She Keeps* is her first novel, and it is, without any reservations, the book of the year."

William Abraham
Boston Globe
(13 May 1942)

"Miss McCarthy is not novelist (the book does not hold together in the least) but she has considerable talent for dissecting people and leaving a nasty mess on the table. One has the feeling that her characters are drawn from life and that all of them are really much pleasanter and decenter people than Miss McCarthy gives them credit for being. Her book, however, has the definite attraction of high-grade back-fence gossip."

Clifton Fadiman
The New Yorker
(16 May 1942)

"Two of the characters in *The Company She Keeps* are identifiable to me as compounds of living people. The first is Mr. Pflaumen of the episode called 'The Genial Host.' The second is Jim Barnett of 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,' which may be taken as the unconscious tribute which bohemianism pays to health. As a graduate of Yale I should not be asked to comment on a chapter which manhandles certain New York publications as well as my alma mater. Yet there is a rough justice in Miss McCarthy's portrait: Yale 'intellectuals,' so called, frequently do lack a final seriousness of purpose, the ability to muster the sustaining moral conviction to carry through enterprises of book length. Some of them, as a matter of fact, may be convicted of the heinous sin of preferring journalism, which is a nether world to the snob in Meg Sargent."

John Chamberlain

The New York Times
(16 May 1942)

"Miss McCarthy has learned the difficult art of setting down everything as it might have happened, without telling a single self-protective lie and without even failing, in the midst of a seduction, to mention the safety pin that holds up the heroine's badly mended underwear. *The Company She Keeps* is not a likable book, nor is it very well put together, but it has the still unusual quality of having been lived."

Malcolm Cowley
New Republic
(25 May 1942) 737

"*The Company She Keeps* is a shrewd, witty, malicious, original, and often brilliantly written book, which is 'a novel in six parts' but which might more accurately be called a heroine in six parts."

Robert Penn Warren
Partisan Review
(November-December 1942)

"The McCarthy pictures have horror in them, and all her characters live in hell, but there is nothing depressing about reading her stories. Her style has such verve and swiftness, is so compelling, that the reader follows after her, on the scavenger hunt for the revealing incident, the ultimate perception that will give away another person and deliver him, naked and quivering, into his understanding. There is an intellectual satisfaction to be found here, gratification in a style that is so perfect a tool for its purpose."

Lorine Pruette
New York Herald Tribune
(24 September 1950) 8

"It is the anguished urban sensibility that Miss McCarthy's prose writhingly plots. The people in her stories all seem uncontrollably involved in endless showdowns with the people around them, or as often as not just with themselves; and nobody, unfortunately, ever seems to win. But this is the deadly pattern of relationships among 'thinking' people. Miss McCarthy's attitude toward the people in her stories is one of contempt and outrage, but it is not just a shallow, critical attitude. It originates in a deep and almost continually disappointed moralism. She wants people with intelligence to be good and decent and productive, and that they are not arouses the furious broken-hearted chastiser in her."

Chandler Brossard
American Mercury
(February 1951) 232-33

"*The Company She Keeps*...is Mary McCarthy's attempt to describe herself with as much objectivity and with as little mercy as she does the company she keeps.... *The Company She Keeps* (1942) does for the urban set of the 1930's what *Memoirs of Hecate County* (1946) by Edmund Wilson does for the inhabitants of suburbia.... The first chapters in this work were written as short stories: 'About half-way through, I began to think of them as a kind of unified story. The same character kept reappearing, and so on. I decided finally to call it a novel, in that it does in a sense tell a story, one story.... It was when I was doing the one about the Yale man that I decided to put the heroine of the earlier stories in that story too'....

In the Foreword of *The Company She Keeps* Mary McCarthy describes these stories as an attempt to define the self--an attempt that fails, ultimately, because the self is not to be found in a book. The emphasis is similar to that of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. The self that is revealed, although as fragmentary as the company she keeps, acts as the central intelligence which helps to define the other characters. During most of the episodes, Margaret Sargent, the autobiographical heroine, is between marriages and adrift in the New York City of the 1930's. Her acquaintances, a strange lot, are as ill at ease among themselves as Margaret Sargent is with them and with herself. But to reject the life that she has chosen and the friends that go with it would be to embrace middle-class existence--a solution she has accepted partially by the

time of the last episode, 'Ghostly Father, I Confess.' The alternative is more deadening than the life to which she is committed. The 'company' also shares Margaret Sargent's self-consciousness and censoriousness."

Barbara McKenzie
Mary McCarthy
(Twayne 1966) 79

"This first book of fiction contains six stories which are tied together by two means: a pronominal switch, and by use of the quest theme in almost a modern picaresque form, the search for self, which is made more poignant by the inability of the narrator to assume (or find) a single person to be. 'It is a case of lost identity. The author and the reader together accompany the heroine back over her life's identity.' The theme of these stories, in varying degrees of intensity, is the pursuit by a disturbed girl of her true identity, a painful, excoriating search that proceeds single-mindedly with only peripheral reference to people she meets on the way.

She is driven by a need to know, to become one person, one pronoun. This need becomes intensified during the quest, and at the last becomes a need for *amour-propre*, so consuming that it caused her 'to snatch blindly at the love of others, hoping to love herself through them.' During the search the heroine recognizes her own ambiguous relationship to society, a recognition that carries with it a love of acting, 'being' someone else, together with an affection for the social strays she encounters along the edges of New York life. The search for a lost self, a divided personality reaching out for alliances to make it whole, brings into the scope of these stories a number of fascinating oddities. The five stories assume full meaning only in the sixth, 'Ghostly Father, I Confess'...

By the time the book was reissued in England in 1957, the *Times Literary Supplement* critic had come around to Mary McCarthy's side. 'These six stories are among the most brilliant satiric portraits of modern fiction.' Here, almost for the first time in connection with this book, this critic notices her *style*, a notice it became fashionable to take of her subsequent work over and above the subject matter or the ideas. 'She writes well *but...*' became a favorite critical gambit. The *Times Literary Supplement* says 'one admires her wit and her considered, self-conscious yet fluidly elegant style,' and then goes on to wonder whether her satire is true, whether satiric exposure of what is should not include an indication of what should be....

There was considerable doubt about whether or not *The Company She Keeps* was a novel. A series of stories held together by a metamorphosing heroine seemed to some critics not to qualify.... Whether or not the stories added up to a novel, they stood well alone, and in the years between this book and the next, a number of other short stories appeared... These are not especially significant... *The Company She Keeps* kept company with the best fiction of the early Forties, had no trouble finding friends when it reappeared in the late Fifties, and is still, in the second half of the Sixties, available in paperback, an eminently readable and moving book, beautifully written, and wearing its years surprisingly well."

Doris Grumbach
The Company She Keeps
(Coward-McCann 1967) 92-93, 110-11

"The reappearing character is Margaret Sargent, of whom we learn at the end that she was the daughter of a tolerant, intelligent Protestant father and a beautiful Catholic mother, and was brought up as a Catholic, after her mother's early death, by a vulgar and bigoted Catholic aunt. Not only has Miss McCarthy given her heroine a background substantially like her own; she has told us herself that the stories are all autobiographical except one, 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man.' In fact, the book is remarkable for the honesty of its self-exposure which dares to include the ignoble and the humiliating and which shows a kind of reckless passion for the truth that is to remain an important element of her talent.

This passion for the truth not only provides the motive power behind the self-exposure in these tales. It turns out to be their underlying subject as well. Their author has suggested, and it has been repeated by many critics, that the 'one story' of the book is that of the heroine's vain search, amid her many identities, for some real identity underlying them all. But this search seems actually to be less important than her moral development, a development of which the ultimate goal is not to know what she is but to behave as

an adult should. What we mainly watch as her story unfolds is Miss Sargent's increasingly desperate struggle, against all the temptations to falsehood in the intellectual life of her time, to stop lying and to live by the truth."

Irvin Stock
Mary McCarthy
(U Minnesota 1968) 14-15

"Margaret Sargent, the protagonist of the novel, tries to find her true self by looking for reflections of it in others. She is a heroine with a background similar to McCarthy's own. The stories are autobiographical, and they include likenesses of several New Yorkers she knew, such as the rogue in 'Rogue's Gallery,' who is based on art dealer Emmanuel Rousuck, for whom McCarthy had worked, and the intellectual in 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,' who resembles John Chamberlain, the editor and critic she attacked in 'Our Critics, Right or Wrong.'

The heroine, unnamed in the first chapter, 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment,' is described only as 'She,' a married 'Woman With a Secret,' delighting in an affair with a Young Man,' pitting husband against lover in a drama played partly for an audience but mostly for herself. 'Actually she doubted whether she could ever have been an actress, acknowledging that she found it more amusing and more gratifying to play herself than to interpret any character conceived by a dramatist.' When she grows tired of the affair, she tells her husband she wants a divorce to marry the young man. Then, when she decides she will not marry him after all, she begins to relish a new public role, that of 'Young Divorcee.' The second chapter, 'Rogue's Gallery,' is an extract from memoirs begun by the heroine, and as such is the only chapter written in the first person. In it Margaret Sargent observes the business dealings of Mr. Sheer, who to her is an irresistible charlatan.

In the third chapter, Margaret Sargent worries that 'her whole way of life had been assumed for purposes of ostentation,' yet she appropriates another role, that of sophisticated New York intellectual, in order to impress 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt,' whom she meets on a westbound train. She gets her comeuppance the next morning when she wakes up in his berth, very hung over, and ponders the pathos and ludicrousness of her situation--the loss of her garter, her use of a safety pin to secure her underpants, her need to vomit when the stranger next to her tells her he loves her.

When he pours a little whiskey--for medicinal purposes, he assures her--Margaret Sargent instinctively sees the comedy in a situation that minutes before she had described as the nadir. 'There was an air of professional rowdyism about their drinking neat whiskey early in the morning in a disheveled compartment, that took her fancy.' The episode, in fact the entire story, is extravagantly funny, but critics complained, especially about the detail of the safety pin, which they called too 'antiseptic' and 'clinical.' Years later Mary McCarthy told an interviewer that the safety pin was 'a damaging detail about the heroine; it was a kind of detail that a worldly man would regard as sloppy and bohemian,' and then compulsively disclosed the whole truth--'it was a detail against myself, really.' Admitting that the story was autobiographical, she continued, 'Nowadays people don't have buttons on underpants, but in those days they did have little buttons on the side that I hadn't bothered to sew on.'

Meg is a dinner guest in the fourth chapter, 'The Genial Host.' Though annoyed that she has been solicited to 'sing for her supper'--the host assembles acquaintances for their intellectual and political viewpoints--she performs as expected, hotly defending Trotsky before the Stalinist at the party, because she is too 'poor, loveless, lonely' to be able to do without dinner invitations. In the fifth and longest chapter, 'Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,' Meg works for a Stalinist magazine from which she is fired for her outspoken Trotskyism.

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 is 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, for it is the source of her suffering. But Meg realizes that it is conscience which enables her to see what is outside her

own desires. Not to know when 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 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 had set out to find herself, learns that it is more important to accept herself. *The Company She Keeps* is a kind of autobiography, and everyone in 1942 knew who her characters 'really' were, but now, when the gossip has died and the political-cultural background has been forgotten, her art, in the end, is what endures. *The Company She Keeps* is witty, entertaining, and alive with what Malcolm Cowley called (in a generally negative review) the 'unusual quality of having been lived.'

Edmund Wilson thought the book marvelous. He recommended it to Vladimir Nabokov, whose own work Wilson had championed when Nabokov came to the United States. Nabokov read it and pronounced it 'a splendid thing, clever, poetic, and new--in fact, I'm flabbergasted.' The book reviews, for the most part, were not as enthusiastic. *Time* magazine's reviewer claimed it aroused 'furious debate among the author's friends and victims'; Malcolm Cowley said it was 'not a likeable book, nor is it very well put together'; the *New York Times* reviewer believed it was 'full of contradictions' and 'a fundamental immaturity'; and Clifton Fadiman wrote that 'Miss McCarthy is no novelist' and called the book nothing more than 'back-fence gossip.' Wilson was disgusted that so few critics recognized what he saw as the debut of a major new talent. Only Christopher Isherwood in *The Nation*, who exclaimed about the 'promise of fine things to come' and the reviewer for *The Atlantic Monthly*, who called Mary McCarthy 'a vivid original,' were as enthusiastic. In any case, *The Company She Keeps* was recognized, and it sold ten thousand copies, a very respectable sale for a first novel."

Carol Gelderman
Mary McCarthy: A Life
(St. Martin's 1988) 100-02

"Locating both McCarthy's guilt about and joy in commodity culture participation historically suggests links to the political climate of the 1930s, an easing of the transition from that era's depression-bred psychology of scarcity to an acceptance of spending in a mid-century culture which insisted on women's primary role as consumers, and finally, the unselfconscious celebration of consumerism that has become the American norm. In *The Company She Keeps*, McCarthy presents the pathetic, poverty-stricken Margaret Sargent as the desperate intellectual woman of the depression era. Her apartment is dingy, her underwear held together with a safety pin. At this point in McCarthy's career, the educated woman must suffer and almost starve to justify her cosmopolitanism, her insistent ignorance of consumer culture."

Jill Wacker
"'Knowing Concerns Me': The Female Intellectual and the Consumer Idiom"
Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy
(Greenwood 1996) 45

"In *The Company She Keeps*, Meg, the self-proclaimed radical, learns that her freedom from the feminine/bourgeois ideal is lonely, and she feels so guilty about the sex she turns to in order to relieve the loneliness that she idealizes sex into an act of self-sacrifice rather than the sordid mess that is depicted. Since Meg remembers her Catholic childhood as being easy because 'the Church could classify it all for you' by categorizing good and evil, sex with Mr. Breen must become a sacrifice to qualify as a good act: "The glow of self-sacrifice illuminated her. Thus, she thought decidedly, is going to be the only act of charity I have ever performed in my life; it will be the only time I have ever given anything when it honestly hurt me to do so...it was the mortification of the flesh achieved through the performance of the act of pleasure." Meg thus turns her sexual encounter on the train into a moral and intellectual choice, an abstraction, so that she does not have to take the responsibility for her decision....

Meg Sargent desperately tries to gain autonomy, to take herself away from the comforts and demands of authority, personified in the Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt. Yet, in doing so, she falls back on abstractions, rather than taking responsibility for her own actions and inactions: the seduction is abstracted

into a political or class war, the bourgeois versus the bohemian, while the safety pin holding together her underwear no longer embarrasses her as it did at first, but becomes a symbol of her 'moral fastidiousness' (*Company* 117). Martha Sinnott [*A Charmed Life*] also retreats to the dogmatic, noncontextual response to a moral dilemma, one which sees the world in the polarities of sin and punishment, good and evil, and a moral position that is ultimately destructive.

According to Thelma Shinn, 'Miles has again enabled Martha to feel evil so that she can feel good about herself when she makes the grand sacrifice. Deciding to punish herself by having the abortion...she admires her internal "lawgiver" and is in awe of her own integrity' (95-96). Neither Meg nor Martha accepts the responsibility for sex, believing that the men have misunderstood or misread them: Meg did not want to have sex with Mr. Breen, nor did Martha with Miles: both were more than tipsy. Both women punish themselves afterwards--Meg reasons that she must have sex with the man again since she submitted the first time, while Martha, although she wants to have a child, has the abortion rather than face the possible result of her infidelity--yet neither feels absolved. The secular punishment is simply not enough....

Meg is McCarthy's most overtly Catholic heroine. Her every contemplated action is debated first as to whether or not it is moral; every object becomes a potential symbol to guide her in her decisions: the safety pin in her underwear becomes a symbol of moral fastidiousness, with a positive moral value rather than simple carelessness. Along with her sense of sacrificing herself to the Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt, she gives him the role and power of a priest, confessing her despised middle-class roots to him, and she later turns his harshness into a self-punishment that excites her as much as the masochistic sex that includes spankings and curses: 'He spoke harshly: this was the drill sergeant, the voice of authority.... This was the first wound he had dealt her, but how deep the sword went in!' She accepts his severity and even expects, with excitement, more to follow--this was merely the first wound.

Although there are some references to Meg's enjoyment of inflicting emotional pain--particularly in 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment,' the monologue about Meg's deliberate withdrawal from her husband-to-be with the lover she is using--most of the time she is the recipient: 'This was, she knew, the most profound, the most subtle, the most idyllic experience of her life....'

Stacey Lee Donohue
"Reluctant Radical: The Irish-Catholic Element"
Twenty-Four Ways (1996) 91-94

"With its wit, its phrasemaking, its concern with the social world, the satiric style that dominates McCarthy's first novel, *The Company She Keeps*, does resist the demands of psychological depth, the introspective thrust of Freudian concerns, the idea of characters fleshed out. It is the style she is best known for. Filled with an enduring sarcasm, with what McCarthy refers to as 'invisible quotation marks,' her stylized prose judges and appraises (Grumbach 203). She draws on the magazine voice cultivated by Dorothy Parker and other writers of the 1920s and 1930s: that of the sophisticated arbiter of taste.

McCarthy often conveys character through long social inventories; she sees in the minutiae of the kind of cigarette holder a woman held, or the kind of earrings she wore, the intricacies of the class she was from and the class she was aspiring to. Her characters are drawn with fine attention to mannerisms of speech and dress, to the nuances of their relation to the social world, the books they might carry and why, the parties they would go to, the ways in which they might think about the parties they would go to, their evaluation of their own position in society, and their calculations about the positions of those they love or admire. These are the main delineations in McCarthy's character sketches.

McCarthy's carefully crafted satire is composed of descriptions that signal and wink to those in the know. She assumes an intimate familiarity with cultural signposts. We are supposed to know, for example, the social meaning of a Brooks Brothers shirt, or of Yale, or the Village, or tennis. McCarthy's satiric style, then, emerges from what could be called an aesthetics of clique. She is, as Jarrell suggests, concerned with a kind of social anatomy, a dissection of character, that involves not soul, not psyche exactly, but a complex network of social motivations.

McCarthy puts it another way: like Meg Sargent, her fiction is endowed with a 'sense of artistic decorum that like a hoity-toity wife was constantly showing poor biography to the door.' (*Company* 264). McCarthy's comic idiom defies the Freudian thrust of character analysis and what she calls 'poor biography.' She is more interested in art and artifice, in the way people present themselves, than in childhood traumas and subconscious motivations.

Given all of this, is the image of Mary McCarthy's shallow comic voice skimming the surface of experience really fair? Or has Randall Jarrell left something out? His *Gertrude* doesn't do justice to McCarthy's attempt to capture, pin down, and analyze human emotions and motivations. With his talk of furniture polish and brand names, he does not take McCarthy's forays into psychoanalysis into account. After all, Meg Sargent, the 'characterless' character, does spend an entire chapter on a psychiatrist's couch. McCarthy does not confine her narrative to the realm of invisible quotations marks, she does not choose, as she could have, to strip her text of Freudian underpinnings and flashes of childhood memories."

Katie Roiphe
"Damn My Stream of Consciousness"
Twenty-Four Ways (1996) 130-31

"Her subsequent stories were not so short or as stylized as her first effort, but they all had the same tension between highly charged events and a cool, almost analytical, presentation. For all the decorum of their tone and syntax, the material could sometimes seem nakedly confessional. At some point she suggested to Maria Leiper that the stories could be joined together to form part of a novel to be called *The Company She Keeps*. In all she would write six self-contained stories, which had as their heroine or narrator a young woman whose politics were radical and whose companions of choice were a circle of New York intellectuals.

With irony and wit she was probing personal areas scarcely mined by women writing literary fiction. At Simon and Schuster, known mostly for its crossword puzzles, the staff believed they had now found a literary author who could reach a wide audience. The reception accorded 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' had done nothing to shake this belief.... In the end, the critical response to the book was decidedly mixed.... Robert Penn Warren [gave] the book full credit for 'seriousness' and 'values,' while questioning the premise of its satire. Either he did not suspect, or was loath to mention, that for many of the novel's most striking characters there were recognizable real life models.... All [John] Chamberlain could do was write a balanced review of the book, say 'its satire is administered as gently and as murderously as a car administers death to a mouse'.... Once you got past the entrenched critical establishment, enthusiasm for *The Company She Keeps* was immediate and enduring. For women the book had a special appeal. But you did not have to be a young woman to feel its power....

Alison Lurie: 'Mary McCarthy's heroine may have setbacks but she doesn't admit that men are in charge of the world and she doesn't admit that she has done anything wrong. I think all the women I knew read her with this in mind. She made us think it was possible to get away with it as a writer and possible to get away with it as a person.'

John Updike: 'Like Hemingway, she began at the top of her form; her fiction never got better than *The Company She Keeps*. Maybe it was too hard to get better than that. She was a writer before she began to write fiction, so that there isn't this sense of stumbling or groping that you sometimes get in early stories; she was a thoroughly sharpened tool. Those stories are so exhilarating in their freedom and in their candor.'

Norman Mailer: 'I was so much in awe of Mary McCarthy in those days. I read *The Company She Keeps* my sophomore year at Harvard. It was a consummate piece of work. It seemed so finished. And at the same time she was taking this risk. She was revealing herself in ways she never did again. She was letting herself be found out. That first book had a felicity to it. I hoped for more from her in her later work. I kept thinking she'd write a great novel. In those days I had no idea how difficult it is to write a great novel.'

The Company She Keeps ends with Margaret Sargent's resolving to stay in her marriage and make the best of it, while she prays to a God she does not believe in to let her continue to see things as they really

are. For almost three more years Mary McCarthy remained in her marriage to Edmund Wilson, winning small concessions like the signature power on his bank account, or a car of her own (an old Chevy a bit the worse for wear) and the right to drive it, but never fundamentally altering the terms of their relations. If she was tempted to leave, she had one compelling reason to stay. Unlike Margaret Sargent she had a young child."

Frances Kiernan
Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy
(Norton 2000) 184, 186-89

"The early stories in *The Company She Keeps* could rightly be called a sensation: They were indeed a sensation for candor, for the brilliant, lightning flashes of wit, for the bravado, the confidence, and the splendor of the prose style. They are often about the clash of theory and practice, taste and ideology. Rich as they are in period details, they transcend the issues, the brand names, the intellectual fads. In 'The Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,' we have the conflict between abstract ideas and self-advancement, between probity and the wish to embrace the new and fashionable. About a young couple, she writes: 'Every social assertion Nancy and Jim made carried its own negation with it, like an Hegelian thesis. Thus it was always being said by Nancy that someone was a Communist but a terribly nice man, while Jim was remarking that someone else worked for Young and Rubicam but was astonishingly liberal. In the memoir, we learn that we can thank Edmund Wilson for turning the young Mary away from writing reviews to undertaking fiction and thereby producing these dazzling stories. We also learn that she thanks him for little else."

Elizabeth Hardwick
"Mary McCarthy in New York"
The Collected Essays of Elizabeth Hardwick
(New York Review Books 2017) 474

The book ends with Meg's plea to God, "Preserve me in disunity." But since she does not believe in God, the source of Unity, her prayer is a final example of her playacting. She has replaced God with Self. Earlier she addressed herself as if she is her own Jesus: "dear Jesus, she told *herself*, frightened, I'm really as hard as nails." [Italics added] Hence her final plea amounts to a declaration to herself that she intends to try very hard to remain the same as she has always been, rather than try to improve. For as is, she sees herself as a romantic heroine, as when she loudly insults a guest in "The Genial Host" and says to herself, "you were gloriously happy because you had been rude and politically unfashionable, and really carried beyond yourself, an angel warrior with a flaming sword" [like Lucifer].

Meg/McCarthy acknowledges the conflict between the flesh and the spirit, one of the major themes of American literature since the poem "The Flesh and the Spirit" (1650), by Anne Bradstreet, but rather than affirm the Spirit against the Flesh, Meg/McCarthy prays to herself that the two forces remain in conflict and that the Flesh be allowed to remain "blind." McCarthy lost her faith in God but like William Wilson in the story by Poe, she cannot escape her conscience, the Spirit, instilled in her by a Catholic upbringing: "It was as if by the mere act of betraying her husband, she had adequately bested him; it was supererogatory for her to gloat, and, if she gloated at all, it was over her fine restraint in not-gloating, over the integrity of her moral sense, which allowed her to preserve even while engaged in sinfulness the acute realization of sin and shame." In "Ghostly Father, I Confess," Meg/McCarthy confesses that she knows the meaning of God but is motivated by romanticism: "To know God and yet do evil, this was the very essence of the romantic life.... If you cannot stop doing evil, you must try to forget about God."

Mary McCarthy's disunity of character subverts her art. *The Company She Keeps* is less a novel than a collection of short stories because it is incoherent: The stories are not arranged in the most effective order. Although the protagonists are all supposed to be Meg Sargent, they are not the same person. For example, the first two Megs *both* embody aspects of McCarthy herself--"Multiple personalities bloomed on the stalk of her ego"--but in these separate stories they contradict each other. Most obviously, the woman in the first story, "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment," is very different in personality, more experienced, and seems older than the young woman in the second story. She is too proud and obsessed by appearances to have ever taken the job the second Meg takes with the antique dealer. The woman in the first story is cold,

calculating, selfish, and cruel whereas the second Meg is humble and generous, even buying meals for her pathetic employer though she cannot afford it: "I had fallen into the habit of buying his dinner."

The book would have been more coherent if the stories were rearranged as follows: "Rogue's Gallery," "The Genial Host," "Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man," "The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt," "Cruel and Barbarous Treatment'," and "Ghostly Father, I Confess." This would also convey a better sense of Meg's increasing corruption. If "Rogue's Gallery" were the first story, it would imply that all six stories are a gallery of portraits of Meg Sargent as a rogue herself not unlike the roguish company she keeps. She too is "trapped in the cage of her own nature." She has in common with Mr. Sheer and with the subsequent Megs a readiness to deceive and cheat. And like Mr. Pflaumen "The Genial Host," Meg/McCarthy has multiple personalities preserved in her "as in a glacier."

Michael Hollister (2020)