ANALYSIS

"The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt" (1942)

Mary McCarthy

(1912-1989)

"Like 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment,' 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' details a new kind of courtship. Concerning the 'factuality' of the latter episode, Miss McCarthy has explained that she attempted 'to describe something that really happened--though naturally you have to do a bit of name-changing and city-changing.' In this story, perhaps the most successful in the collection, something *does* happen. Margaret Sargent allows herself to get picked up by the man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt.

Indicative of the rootless world in which the heroine moves is the train that is taking her to Portland, Oregon, ostensibly for the purpose of telling an aunt of plans to be married again. When a new man enters the car, Margaret Sargent appraises him hopefully but finds that he, like the other passengers, is Out of the Question: 'He looked, she decided, like a middle-aged baby, like a young pig...

But the courtship proceeds anyway along lines determined by the situation: the initial 'sizing up' is quickly followed by the approach which, in turn, leads to the proposal--in this instance, a pre-lunch drink in the man's compartment. The acceptance follows next: 'A compartment was something she had not counted on. But she did not know (she never had known) how to refuse.' In her inability to refuse, Margaret is very much like the heroines of Mary McCarthy's novels, such as Martha Sinnott who cannot reject Miles Murphy (*A Charmed Life*) or the various heroines of *The Group* who are gluttons for new ideas or new gadgets and, in some instances, 'new' men. Margaret Sargent's unwillingness to turn down an invitation is simply another indication of her insecurity and unfulfillment.

In the man's compartment, with the door left open, Margaret finds herself enjoying the highballs which 'tasted' as her own never did, the way the looked in the White Rock advertisements.' The man's efficiency in deploying his brown calf luggage pleases her, as does his attitude toward the waiter; and she discerns in the glances of other passengers 'envy, admiration, and censure'.... Part of the search for the self involves finding someone who will be able to explain that self; and, for awhile, the man in the Brooks Brothers shirt seems to Margaret Sargent such a person. As the long whiskey-drinking afternoon takes on m ore and more qualities of a secular confession, they talk intimately about their marriages. When the man points out that he thinks that she still loves her former husband, she questions him eagerly, believing that she has found the person 'who could tell her what she was really like.... If she once knew, she had no doubts that she could behave perfectly... How, she thought, can you act upon your feelings if you don't know what they are?... By rejecting the Church and 'her aunt's illiterate morality, she had given away her sense of herself.'

But the man's reply falls short of comprehending the complexities of her marriage. Later, during dinner in the compartment, she finds herself explaining in erotic detail the intricacies of her former marriage. And then she hears herself asking if he knows her favorite quotation and realizes that she is getting drunk.... The time shifts abruptly to the following morning. Margaret awakens drowsily convinced that Nothing Had Happened and that she is in her own lower berth. Still half asleep, she moves and touches the naked body

of the man. Events of the previous night come back to her memory hazily: the closed door, their singing, and then the man trying to kiss her. 'She had fought him off for a long time, but at length her will had softened,' and they had made love, somewhat peculiarly, she now thinks.... 'There were (oh, holy Virgin!) four-letter words that she had been forced to repeat, and, at the climax, a rain of blows on her buttocks.... Hurriedly she tries to dress...

The man's sudden awakening and his demand that she kiss him destroy the possibility of an easy escape. Sudden nausea overcomes her, and she pulls away from his embrace: 'He pointed to the toilet seat... She raised the cover and vomited, while the man sat on the bed and watched. This was the nadir, she thought bitterly; surely nothing worse than this could ever happen to her. She wiped the tears from her eyes and leaned against the wall.' Afterwards, troubled by a feeling that she was 'as hard as nails,' she agrees to make love. '*This,* she thought decidedly, *is going to be the only act of charity I have ever performed in my life*... As she waits impatiently 'for the man to exhaust himself,' she imagines herself a sacrificial lamb and finds pleasure at her selflessness and goodness.

In New York City, she and the man continue their affair (she had decided again not to get married), but their differences make its rapid dissolution inevitable. From the start, he had been Out of the Question (his emblemed shirt had accurately given him away). When her father dies some time later, the man sends her a telegram which reads 'SINCEREST CONDOLENCES...' She tears it up carefully and throws it into the wastebasket... To the end, although still unsure of herself, as indicated by her relentless self-consciousness, she remains nonetheless an opponent of the bourgeois sentimentality represented by the message of the telegram. Also apparent in this account is another element found in the writing of Mary McCarthy: the sexual passivity of her heroine. Miss McCarthy's typical female character usually finds herself being pushed rather unwillingly into bed. And even during sexual intercourse, the heroine does not stop *thinking*, or so it seems.... Although Miss McCarthy's heroines are not aggressive sexually, they are provocative in actions and words....

Elizabeth Hardwick finds the frankness of Mary McCarthy's description of sexual encounters in direct contrast with 'the hot prose of male writers.... In her fiction, shame and curiosity are nearly always found together and in the same strange union we find self-condemnation and the determined pursuit of experience; introspective irony and flat, daring action.' Part of the original contribution of Mary McCarthy, Miss Hardwick claims, is 'to have written, from the woman's point of view, the comedy of Sex.... What helps to make these scenes comic, apart from the heroine's stubborn pursuit of adventure, is her persistence in retaining an image of herself and her bedfellows, so that their various weaknesses are displayed publicly against the setting of an act that society has deemed private. The effect is ludicrous. Also there is an almost comic innocence in Margaret Sargent's feeling that her sexual encounter with the man in the Brooks Brothers shirt is the nadir of her life and that she could experience no greater horror.... Margaret Sargent's 'fall' is, in actuality, only the moral pratfall of high comedy and not an experience in Evil as her overactive imagination first envisions it to be."

Barbara McKenzie
Mary McCarthy
(Twayne 1966) 89-92

"This is the most famous, most notorious of all her stories. 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' had appeared earlier in *Partisan Review*, and caused Mary McCarthy to be widely discussed in New York literary circles as well as much talked about in cultivated academic circles throughout the country. For a long time, and until publication of *The Group*, it is fair to say that only a coterie knew much about her work. The single exception was 'The Man'; it was read, or at least known and talked about, for the same reasons that *The Group* was to be. It was responsible for her early reputation as a 'racy' or 'sexy' writer.

'The Man' is another journey story, translated into Pullman car terms; to note its surface resemblance to something like an episode in *Joseph Andrews* or *Tom Jones* is not too farfetched. The heroine is halfway through a cross-continental journey west to Portland to tell her aunt she is about to be remarried. The train is passing through Nebraska when, in the club car, Meg (the She and I now for the first time given a proper-noun name) begins a conversation with a traveling salesman 'in steel,' Bill Breen. They go to his compartment ('Don't worry.... It'll be perfectly proper. I promise to leave the door open'), drink a great deal,

and exchange details of their lives. The salesman comes from Cleveland, lives in a fourteen-room house with his two small sons and his wife Leonie, who 'loves her house and children. Of course, she was interested in culture, too, particularly the theatre, and there were always a lot of young men hanging about her; but then she was a Vassar girl, and you had to expect a woman to have different interests from a man.' She is, in addition, a Book-of-the-Month-Club member.

Breen buys his haberdashery at Brooks Brothers, all 'except his ties and shoes.' In her turn, Meg tells him of her job on *The Liberal*, conscious that she is now, in the compartment, playing a new part. In the club car she has been the great lady, now to the traveling salesman she is metamorphosed into the Bohemian Girl. She becomes in her own eyes what she thinks she is to his. Her disillusion with the New York literary world falls away: 'What she got from his view of her was a feeling of uniqueness and identity, a feeling that she had once had when, at twenty, she had come to New York and had her first article accepted by a liberal weekly, but which had slowly been rubbed away by four years of being on the inside of the world that had looked magic from Portland, Oregon.'

They talk politics, they talk about their marriages. His undeviating literary opinions remind her of a cousin 'who was like that about the theatre,' and she remembers how her aunt used to complain, saying, 'It's no use asking cousin Florence whether the show at the stock company is any good this week; cousin Florence had never seen a bad play.' There was almost no fiction to this memory which is taken whole, another evidence of her use of experience to shore up a character. In *Memories* she tells us that: '...to Aunt Eva there were no distinctions. Every play she saw she pronounced "very enjoyable." And of the actors: "They took their parts well." We used to laugh at her and try to get her to acknowledge that the play was better some weeks than others. But Aunt Eva would not cross that Rubicon; she smelled a rat. To her, all the plays and players were equal, and equally, blandly good.' Mr. Breen is given Aunt Eva's bourgeois pursuit of culture without the intelligence to do anything with it.

Meg ends the remembered part of the drunken evening by quoting her favorite line from Chaucer's *Troilus and Creseyde*: 'I am myn owene woman, wel at ese.' The wishful thinking, the irony and the furious untruth of this becomes apparent to her when she awakens next morning in his compartment and his bed, with him naked beside her. At this point, and once her moral horror at 'this sin' is over, Meg realizes (as do many Mary McCarthy heroines in other sexual situations) the purely ludicrous elements in her situation, 'the comic nature' of the loss of a garter, the safety pin she discovers in her underwear, her need to throw up when the salesman awakens and tells her he loves her. The details of the night before, full of bribed porters and vague recollections of the perverse violences that were preliminary and necessary to the act itself, at first disgust, then amuse her: 'If the seduction...could be reduced to its lowest common denominator, could be seen in farcical terms, she could accept and even, wryly, enjoy it. The world of farce was a sort of moral underworld, a cheerful, well-lit hell where a Fall was only a prat-fall after all.' In her second novel, Mary McCarthy generalizes about the sexual prowess of businessmen: of Joe Lockwood in *The Oasis* she says: 'like many virile business leaders, he was sexually recessive,' and this generalization may cast some retroactive light on Breen.

Now the story itself falls away into cleanup details. At his insistence, Meg takes a bath, they breakfast (a 'ceremonial feast' such as all primitive people indulge in after 'a cataclysmic experience'), he confesses his disappointment with his life and she, curiously, begins to like and understand this businessman, the sort of person who, in all her previous experience, had seemed so gross and stereotyped.

Charles Eisinger in his book on *The Fiction of the Forties* thought that the 'clash of two cultures,' the Bohemian-liberal-intellectual and the business-bourgeois, dated this story, that it is now merely 'redolent of the thirties'--and no longer true. Another critic, Mason Wade, denied the existence of the conflict in these terms by claiming that Meg was 'a pseudo-intellectual woman.' Neither, it seems to me, takes sufficient note of the feminine element at this point in the story which is not symbolic or typical but psychologically accurate.... She gets off the train, knowing now that there is no point to her trip home--'she was never going to marry the young man back in New York.' Their last meeting and then their parting are anticlimactic horrors. He falls back into the Reactionary-Big Businessman stereotype, and finally is transformed into the expected, cliche-spouting fool. The brief, funny, touching encounter is over. Meg has made another try at a Relationship and failed again.

Mr. Breen is, in some ways, more masculine, more direct, than the usual Mary McCarthy males, truncated, wispy, weird underdog spirits against which her fictional females pose themselves to be seen and understood by the reader. Their male inadequacies, their little oddities, are recessive traits necessary for the definition of the dominant traits of her feminine characters. She knows this herself, of course--it is no discovery of mine--and so she takes much of the starch out of the discovery. As the reader becomes aware that her world is a muliebrity [womanhood] served and heightened by diluted masculinity, he is forced to confess that she was aware of it first, indeed, Meg pointed it out to him somewhere back there: '...Somehow each of them was handicapped for American life and therefore humble in love. And was she, too, disqualified, did she really belong to this fraternity of cripples, or was she not a sound and normal woman who had been spending her life in self-imposed exile, a princess among the trolls?'"

Doris Grumbach
The Company She Kept
(Coward-McCann 1967) 97-101

"The book's deeper story continues: the heroine's play-acting is complicated by an opposing impulse. 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' is an account of how Miss Sargent, now seen in the role of poised, sophisticated New York intellectual, is drawn into an affair with a businessman on a cross-country train trip because she enjoys playing that role before such an audience. And yet, showing off an advance copy of a new book, she wonders uneasily 'if her whole way of life had been assumed for purposes of ostentation.' When the man speaks shrewdly about her past, she leans forward. 'Perhaps at last she had found him, the one she kept looking for, the one who could tell her what she was really like.... If she once knew, she had no doubt that she could behave perfectly.' Then there is her horrified shame, when she awakens in his compartment, at the drunken sex of the night before which she gradually remembers. (This is the first of those cool 'shocking' notations of the unattractive particulars of 'romantic' episodes for which Miss McCarthy has won a certain notoriety, though far from being exploitations of sex, they seem expressions of a puritanical disgust.)

Finally, she becomes aware of a reluctance to leave the man, who, falling in love with her, had changed in her eyes from the vulgar businessman type to an actual and attractive person; and at this 'a pang of joy went through her as she examined her own sorrow and found it to be real.' The affair dies away after the trip, and the story ends with both falling back into the stereotypes from which they had briefly emerged, but Margaret Sargent has acquired substance as a character with the disclosure that she is divided, like the rest of us, and that the hunger of her intellectual's vanity is opposed by a hunger for reality."

Irvin Stock
Mary McCarthy
(U Minnesota 1968) 15-16

"Margaret is back in character as the young sophisticate, but this time it is an honest and self-critical 'she' whose point of view is used. Margaret is on a train again, traveling to Portland to tell Aunt Clara that she is to be married again, though not, of course, to the Young Man of the first story. In the club car where she first sees the Man, she decides that he looks 'like a middle-aged baby, like a young pig, like something in a seed catalogue,' 'plainly Out of the Question.' Nonetheless she and the Man signal to each other from their separate conversations. Although it would be simpler to leave the car than to remain and be picked up--'the whole thing would be so vulgar, one would expose oneself so to the derision of the other passengers'--Margaret settles back to wait, reading an advance copy of an avant-garde novel and expecting the man to be impressed.

But he is not as simple as he looks; he has even read something by the author of the unpublished novel. Margaret accepts his 'perfectly proper' invitation to his compartment for a drink. As passersby peer in, she enjoys a double image of herself, supposing that to them she is the great lady in these expensive surroundings, but to Mr. Breen the Bohemian Girl. He evokes a response from her liberal heart when he says that he would like to vote for the Socialist presidential candidate, Norman Thomas. Margaret tries to see him as a frustrated socialist or man of sensibility whom she can 'release from the chains of habit,' but he keeps 'clanking those chains comfortably and impudently in her face.'

Still, he is no *ordinary* business man. He and the little adventure have a 'human appeal' that she yields to, 'against her judgment.' They talk of his liberal wife, Leonie, and of Margaret's former husband, the memory of whom now fills her with horror: 'How could I have done it?' she wonders, hurrying on to talk of her love affairs. Finally she confides in the man that her favorite quotation is 'I am myn owene woman, wel at ese,' although like Chaucer's Criseyde, she is less her own woman than she hopes.

She wakes the next morning remembering that she has been drunk, thankful that nothing happened but discovering that she is naked in bed with a man--the scene is distinctly reminiscent of the fifteen-year-old Mary's experience with Bob Berdan. Her horror grows as memories come back piecemeal; yearningly, she envisions herself 'in a black dress, her face scrubbed and powdered, her hair nearly combed, sitting standoffishly in her seat.' Desperately trying to realize the image, she scrambles into her clothes, fastening her mended pants with a little brass pin, but before she can find her garter, the man stirs and proclaims his love for her and his intention of divorcing Leonie. 'I was tight,' she protests. 'A girl like you doesn't let a man have her just because she's drunk,' he responds. The exchange ends with Margaret vomiting into the toilet, that 'indecent' feature of the Pullman compartment, thinking 'bitterly' that 'surely nothing worse than this could ever happen to her.'

Mr. Breen knows how to handle these things. He has even 'squared' the porter, about whom Margaret inquires, anxious that he who made the bed may know who slept in it. 'He thinks you're wonderful. He said tome, 'Mr. Breen, you sure done better than most.' After a moment's feeling that she cannot bear it, Margaret giggles at the vulgarity. If the episode can be seen 'in farcical terms,' she can 'accept, and even, wryly, enjoy it.'

They make love again, and then Mr. Breen sends her off to take a bath. Afterward, they share a 'ceremonial feast' of breakfast. Margaret knows now that she will not marry her fiancé. In Cleveland, on her return trip, Mr. Breen meets the train. He has sent her 'several pieces of glamour-girl underwear and a topaz brooch,' and he is bearing a bottle of whiskey and two 'garish purple orchids.' His interest is already flagging, however, for even while begging Margaret to marry him, he talks of business and of a vacation trip he is planning with Leonie. When he visits in New York, he is critical of her apartment. She knows that his 'splurge' is at last over when she receives a letter dictated to his secretary. Always sentimental about her father, he heard, somehow, of her father's death, for he sends a telegram: '*SINCEREST CONDOLENCES*...'

Mr. Breen is not, as Margaret first thought, sensitive and discriminating, he is appreciative of experience, but what he has is not a sensibility but an appetite. He is merely voracious--at first Margaret sees him as a 'young pig,' and she sees him grow even more 'porcine' in the alcoholic haze of his compartment--and even a little violent in sex. Without taste, he has the prudence to choose name brands: Brooks Brothers clothing and a Vassar wife, the conservatism of the one nicely balanced by the liberalism of the other. He has a human warmth and accessibility, enhanced by a modest intelligence, by humor, and, as Margaret ruefully admits to herself, by money.

Margaret simply flatters herself by thinking that he displays an unusual shrewdness in liking *her*, so unordinary and unconventional. She is attractive, witty, and sympathetic; why shouldn't he like her? Nice himself, assuming that she is nice, the man associates sex and love and in effect expects to make an honest woman of this nice girl whom he has slept with. His mind runs in well-worn tracks. Margaret, he predicts, will come to no good: 'In a few years, you'll be one of those Bohemian horrors with oily hair and long earrings.' He talks of his pleasure in meeting 'different' people. 'Golly,' he says, 'if I were a writer like you!' It is the universal cry of the nonliterate to the literate; the craft of writing is negligible, and wasted to boot on people who don't know any good stories. He believes that Margaret needs a man to look after her; if not he, then her father, who should keep her at home in Portland. The hopelessness of his vulgarity is finally and cruelly demonstrated by his gifts.

In this story, Margaret also is painfully exposed. The brass pin, the rope that holds a suitcase closed, and rundown shoe are tangible evidence that this young woman is less well assembled than she might be. She is vulnerable and beset by self-doubts. Thinking that it is 'not really romantic to be the-girl-who-sits-in-the-club-car-and-picks-up-men,' she remembers Aunt Clara's warnings against cheapening herself; and she wonders about the book. Since it was actually given to her by a publisher's assistant, 'she could not be

accused of insincerity. Unless it could be that her whole say of life had been assumed for purposes of ostentation.... If it had not been this book, it would have been something else, which would have served equally well to impress a pink middle-aged stranger.

She is the one who is impressed, however, by Mr. Breen's command of things. His 'connoisseurship' pleases her and prompts her to conclude that the men previously attracted to her have been in some way 'disqualified' and therefore 'humble in love,' including her reliable but 'peculiar-looking' former husband and her handsome but good-for-nothing fiancé. Despite her high-minded contempt for the business world, she sees Mr. Breen as coming from the 'center of things where choice is unlimited' and exults that he has 'chosen *her*.'

Words like 'ritualistic,' 'ceremonial,' and even 'farcical' signal that Margaret is still performing, still referring action to patterns by which it can be judged aesthetically. She is pleased with her role until she decides that Mr. Breen is too old for her and that once again she has taken a 'lame duck' lover: 'If she had met him ten years before, would he have chosen her then?' While bathing, she reorganizes the little adventure into an allegory in which she reclaims her wavering superiority and rejoices even in the brass pin. Ineffectual as it has been in its literal function, it still symbolizes poverty and the 'citadel of socialist virginity' which can be taken by the rich businessman but 'never truly subdued.'

'The man's whole assault on her...was an incidental atrocity in the long class war. She smiled again, thinking that she had come out of it untouched, while he had been reduced to jelly.' Far from it. Mr. Breen will fade painlessly from Margaret's life. He is untouched; but she, if not precisely reduced to a jelly, will continue a diminished journey. Literally, she has no news for Aunt Clara, and the trip to Portland is pointless.

Reluctantly returning to the compartment after the bath, Margaret knows that she must see 'this absurd, ugly love story to a conclusion,' for that is what it is and no amount of artistic distancing can free her from responsibility in it. Her feelings are the problem. 'How,' she wondered earlier, 'can you act upon feelings if you don't know what they are?' But she had a fundamental distaste for Mr. Breen from the moment she first saw him. Instead of acting upon that feeling, she played her role, drank too much, and engaged *his* feelings. In the aftermath, she had a shattering insight: '*Dear Jesus,... I'm really as hard as nails.'* The second act of love was an effort at atonement. '*This,*' she thought, *'is going to be the only real 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*.'

Now, she makes the man the gift of a perfect adventure. 'Right now, I think I can live on this one day for the rest of my life,' he tells her. She quietly lets him slip away, in his own way and time, without spoiling it for him. There is no anguish, no breakup. After his last visit, Margaret is alone 'trying to decide whether to eat in a tearoom or cook herself a chop,' and we recall that 'women alone look conspicuous and forlorn in good restaurants'; tearooms are part of the terror of spinsterhood anticipated by the young woman of 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment.' Now, however, the thought is not foremost in Margaret's mind. She feels 'flat and sad' but glad that she never told Mr. Breen of the broken engagement. In sparing Bob Breen, she has performed an act of love and expiation; she has begun to question the role she plays in the company she keeps.

Margaret is often alone. She makes two solitary journeys, she divorces her husband, and she breaks two engagements. She is alone at a gallery, and again at a theater, when she runs into Mr. Sheer. She is alone after he last meeting with Mr. Breen; later, when she tears up his telegram because 'it would have been dreadful if anyone had seen it,' we have no idea who 'anyone' could be."

Willene Schaefer Hardy
Mary McCarthy
(Frederick Ungar 1981) 34-42

"The scene was the college lunchroom, sometime in my junior year. A lively discussion was going on about a story by Mary McCarthy in a recent issue of *Partisan Review*.... If the author of 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' hoped to *epater* her readers, she certainly succeeded with us. It was one thing for a writer to dazzle her audience with astringent theater chronicles and uncompromising book reviews....It was

quite another to turn irony on herself, as she seemed to be doing in this story, which read like a hilarious confession of scandalous behavior.... 'Wouldn't you think,' one voice at the lunch table said, 'that even if her conscience hadn't kept her from going *all the way*, having a safety pin in her underpants would have?'"

Eileen Simpson
"Ode to a Woman Well at Ease"
Lear's (April 1990)

"With 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt,' the third and, half a century later, still the most remarkable story in the series. Mary McCarthy's search would also reveal a unique ability to depict the human comedy of sex from the standpoint of the hunter and the hunted both--in this case, a young woman who was one and the same.... George North, the original Brooks Brothers man, worked for American Radiator and Standard Sanitary, a plumbing concern.... While Meg plays the Great Lady, for her companion she is the Bohemian Girl: a revelation to him.... The man begins to rail against "you people"--the leftists--who are 'never going to get anywhere in America with that proletariat stuff. Every workingman wants to live the way I do. He doesn't want to live the way he does'....

It was 'a vein of sympathy and understanding' she had glimpsed in him, which made him available to any human being, just as he was available to any novelist as a reader. This availability did not proceed from 'stupidity,' as she had presumed in the club car, 'but from a restless and perennially hopeful curiosity' (not unlike her own).... In the course of the conversation, Meg has 'glided all the way from aversion to tenderness'.... Meg wonders: 'Could she not say that all that conjugal tenderness had been a brightly packaged substitute for the Real Thing, for the long carnal swoon she had never quite been able to execute in the marriage bed?'... Everything she says seems to be barbed with sexual innuendo. It was always like that. When she was a schoolgirl she exchanged dirty jokes with college boys, who then stopped the car and lunged at her, while all the time she only wanted to be a good fellow....

The more closely one reads 'The Man in the Books Brothers Shirt,' the more one is impressed by the improbable intensity of emotion. Could a Babbitt-like businessman from Pittsburgh *alone* have inspired the tale? Or had something of the misbegotten affair with Wilson--who was also fat and over forty and very 'serious'--spilled over and touched the story with an urgency, however comic, which is nearly without parallel in McCarthy's fiction?... Meg is brought back to earth. She has fooled herself about him, too, she sees; time has also made a lame duck out of him. She remains rigid in his embrace, 'hard as nails'; but then she begins to *feel* hard, and so she begins to hug him warmly, kissing him carefully on the mouth. A 'glow of self-sacrifice' illuminates her. 'This, she thought...is going to be the only real act of charity I have ever performed in my life...it was the mortification of the flesh achieved through the performance of the act of pleasure'....

'Tidings from the Whore,' was how Delmore Schwartz referred privately to 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' when it was published in *Partisan Review* in the summer of 1941--after having been turned down by Robert Penn Warren at *The Southern Review*. (The story was full of 'brilliant writing,' Warren wrote Mary, 'but...the sex episode probably makes it unusable for us,' a judgment the editors communicated 'with some humiliation.') At first, there had been sentiment among *PR*'s editors against printing the story on the grounds that it was journalism, not fiction; but it was too good to be true.... Delmore Schwartz was not the only one who tended to regard Mary McCarthy as a fallen woman. But all things considered the story broke like a comet over the heads of McCarthy's literary generation; and it established her reputation as a writer, a *rough* writer, and as a woman, a *tough* woman--neither of which she was at all.

To [William] Barrett, Meg Sargent was 'almost a dramatized thesis' of McCarthy's chosen motto from Chaucer: I am mine own woman well at ease. But Mary McCarthy uses the motto ironically, just as she regarded her own bohemian celebrity in the Village ironically. In 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' the line from Chaucer marks an ironic transition from Meg Sargent's relief that 'the nightmare [had] lifted' her rude awakening in the steel man's berth the next day. For that moment, she had become, in effect, the *man's* woman, and she was *not* at ease....

"We did not know it then,' [William] Barrett continues...'but [McCarthy was in fact firing the first salvo in the feminist war that now rages within our society'.... Alfred Kazin's denunciation, in *Starting Out in the Thirties,* [is] that McCarthy's stories display 'that bleak, unsparing, suspicious view of human nature which is so much admired by reactionaries because it leaves the lower classes so little reason to rebel'.... The book disturbed [William Carlos] Williams for 'its plodding murderousness'.... Williams suggested that McCarthy's fiction is written principally for those it attacks... 'The men are pretty foul'....

Female reviewers have also projected themselves into McCarthy's trysting spots with unseemly results. '[F]from the embarrassing safety pin in her underwear to the dirty words [Mr. Breen] asks her to repeat during her copulation, to the literal vomit in her mouth the next morning, to the bath he insists she take because she smells, Miss McCarthy spares the reader nothing,' the critic Eleanor Widmer laments, as if reading Mary McCarthy is akin to being molested in a health club. 'Is her easy virtue to be held for or against her?' Miss Widmer wonders, reminding the reader darkly that 'the gains of the sexual revolution of the 60s had not permeated the 40s and 50s, and that McCarthy ran the risk of appearing as a loose woman."

Carol Brightman
Writing Dangerously: Mary McCarthy and Her World
(Clarkson Potter 1992) 196-201, 203, 206-07

"In her two best books, especially *The Company She Keeps*, McCarthy is an unformed character in search of a self, wrestling with knaves and naifs who are not really her equal. Yet she is also troubled, put upon, ambivalent. Always an autobiographical writer, McCarthy needed her personal history to furnish her with a character she would never fully understand, and with a ready-made story that would intrigue and challenge her. Her own story gave her the pieces of a plot she wasn't good at inventing, dealing with a person to whom she *can* make things happen.

From the time she wrote her first book Mary McCarthy set out to shock, and with the story 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' she fully succeeded. She was after all the shiksa in group of largely Jewish intellectuals, a scarlet woman in a decade that thought itself more proper and serious than the 1920s. Innocently enough, she needed a slight aura of scandal to set her creative juices flowing. When I first read 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' twenty years later, this account of Meg Sargent's casual seduction in a Pullman compartment was still a byword for sexual daring and sustained wit and brilliance. For its time, the portrait of the heroine as intransigent intellectual was as original as the heroine as casual (though easily embarrassed) sexual adventurer. Every charge that would later be leveled at McCarthy--her snobbishness, her undue care for social niceties, her wobbly moral compass, her traffic in gossip, her sense of superiority --was not only showcased in this story but became part of its theme as the protagonist constantly probed her own behavior.

If feminist critics show little interest in *The Company She Keeps*, it may be because Meg Sargent is neither a victim nor a role model. The company *she* keeps is entirely male. Her only relationship with other women--including the wives of the men she sleeps with and the women in the radical bohemian milieu in which she has been living--is competitive and dismissive. The wives are caricatures of middle-class respectability; the others offer little competition. 'It was not difficult, after all, to be the prettiest girl at a party for the sharecroppers' (112).

Meg is completely oriented toward men yet intensely critical of them. Only they can give her the stage on which to shine, the platform where she can look down on them. Nearly every one of the stories is about the Gifted but Confused Woman who gets embroiled with the Unsatisfactory Male, beginning with the husband and the lover in her first story, 'Cruel and Barbarous Treatment,' and winding up with her psychiatrist and her second husband in 'Ghostly Father, I Confess.' The Brooks Brothers man, who seems impossible to begin with--a 'self-made m an,' a Babbitt (83)--turns out to be the least unsatisfactory male in the book, though he shares one quality that disqualifies several of the others: he is simply too nice to her, and claims horribly to see the sweet girl concealed inside her. But in her whirl of projections--and much of the story is the quicksilver flow of her imaginings, her rationalizations--she turns even his vulgarity to advantage. If he is not an intellectual, as she is, then he must somehow represent Ordinary Life, with which intellectuals are always in danger of losing touch. Leapfrogging from one fantasy to another, she sees in

him what she misses in all the men she knows in New York, 'the shrewd buyer's eye, the swift brutal appraisal' (111). Of the men she had been with, she feels,

> "In one way or another they are all of them lame ducks. The handsome ones, like her fiancé, good-for-nothing, the reliable ones, like her husband, were peculiar-looking, the well-to-do ones were short and wore lifts in their shoes or fat with glasses, the clever ones were alcoholic or slightly homosexual, the serious ones were foreigners or else wore beards or black shirts or were desperately poor and had no table manners. Somehow each of them was handicapped for American life and therefore in love" (112).

This brilliant inventory, like the rest of the story, highlights the way McCarthy's judgments--for all her confessional intensity, sexual bravado, and intellectual arrogance--were neither religious, moral, nor political but rather social judgments about class, taste, style, and, above all, appearances. As the love interest of these men she felt somehow devalued.... Meg Sargent hasn't the least *moral* qualm about getting seduced by Babbitt on the train. 'Still,' she thinks, 'the whole thing would be so vulgar; one would expose oneself so to the derision of the other passengers' (83-84). In *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* McCarthy recalls how, as a schoolgirl, her desire to shine was replaced by the 'fear of appearing ridiculous' as a 'governing motive' of her life, a motive that no doubt contributed to her lifelong need to highlight the ridiculous in other people's behavior (130).

But in 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt,' surprisingly, the romantic side of McCarthy, her tenderness, overcomes this fear, overcomes even her social and intellectual scruples. 'For the thing was, the man and the little adventure of being with him had a kind of human appeal that she kept giving in to against her judgment. *She liked him'* (94-95). For once she is unguarded, pleasantly embarrassed, entirely without cunning. Meg Sargent's gloriously tacky adventure on the train is also Mary McCarthy's self-transcendence as a writer. Here she dramatizes and overcomes the defects attributed to her fiction--that she is too judgmental and superior, that she doesn't love any of her characters, that, as Kazin insists, she reserves indulgence only for herself. McCarthy could not really sustain the benign vein of this story. Malice, mockery, and witty derision would remain essential to her fiction..."

Morris Dickstein
"A Glint of Malice"
Twenty-Four Ways of Looking at Mary McCarthy
(Greenwood 1996) 21-23

"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. Sargent's reliance on taste without money, finally, has a sort of anorexic middle-class pathos. Her carefully assembled veneer of nonparticipation, McCarthy shows, is just another kind of consumerism. 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' appears to Sargent 'like something in a seed catalogue,' yet even he has the skill to choose brand names which win and impress her: Brooks Brothers clothing and a Vassar wife...

'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt,' while not a tale of consumer education, relies on a structure of the kinds of knowing available to women. The story is an inventory of Margaret Sargent's passive knowledge: she *knew* now that New York was not what it had appeared from the viewpoint of a western childhood; she *knew* that there in that rail car she was beautiful and witty, and *knew* that she did not know how to refuse. Instead, she and the avant-garde novel she holds as a prop fall victim to a more ruthless consumer, the suited man whose 'connoisseurship' she locates at the 'center of things where choice is unlimited' and who chooses her (113). In the absence of self-knowledge, McCarthy's young women construct themselves as consumable. The only feelings Sargent does know are materialized in the objects which surround her and help to create in her the lasting memory value offered by an exquisite product.

From the 1930s onward, as many among the vanguard of American industrial designers laid out their personal recipes for a successful styling strategy, one necessary ingredient was mentioned repeatedly--'memory value.' Industrial design was largely a task of creating commercially appealing surfaces, but its

effectiveness depended upon its ability to touch something deep in the consumer. Product designs, packages, and corporate symbols had to be able to be impressed on the memory, had to endure in the minds of prospective consumers. McCarthy assigns some of this strategy to Margaret Sargent. 'She could not be accused of insincerity,' argues McCarthy, 'unless it could be that her whole way of life had been assumed for purposes of ostentation...if it had not been this book, it would have been something else, which would have served equally well to impress a pink middle-aged stranger' (84). The crowning blow in 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' is the man's self-assurance as shopper, his insistence that Sargent is merely a nice normal girl in exile among misfit intellectuals. For him, her self-creation has no 'memory value.'

The real interest in 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' is the memory value assigned minor objects. The brass safety pin Sargent scrambles for the morning after once again symbolizes this woman's participation in consumer culture through lack of participation. Failure to mend becomes a statement of politics. In the bath after her escape from the man's compartment, Sargent experiences a revulsion for the American ethos of consumerism: 'All the pretty things she had seen in shops and coveted appeared to her suddenly gross, superfatted, fleshly, even, strangely, unclean. By a queer reversal, the very safety pin in her underwear, which she had blushed for earlier in the morning, came to look to her now like a symbol of moral fastidiousness, just as the sores of a mendicant saint can, if thought of in the right way, testify to his spiritual health.' (117).... Both McCarthy's fiction and McCarthy's autobiography are thick with the things of real life."

Jill Wacker
"'*Knowing* Concerns Me': The Female Intellectual and the Consumer Idiom"
Twenty-Four Ways (1996) 45-47

"Mary McCarthy! '*The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt!* That's my Bible!' I once heard a young woman exclaim. No doubt the famous short-story is rightly understood as a sort of parable representing many a young girl's transgressions, even if it does not concern itself with the steps in the sinner's rehabilitation. It would be hard to think of any writer in America more interesting and unusual than Mary McCarthy. Obviously she wants to be noticed, indeed to be spectacular; and she works toward that end with what one can only call a sort of trance-like seriousness. There is something puritanical and perplexing in her lack of relaxation, her utter refusal to give an inch of the ground of her own opinion. *She cannot conform*....

In the paperback edition of *The Company She Keeps* we see on the cover a pretty girl posed for the seduction scene on the train--bare shoulders, whisky bottle, and a reflecting pout on her lips. But the picture cannot give any idea of the unexpected contents of the mind of the actual fictional heroine. The psychological fastidiousness and above all the belligerent mood of the surrendering girl are the essence of the story. The sexual affair with the second-rate 'man in the Brooks Brothers shirt' is for the heroine both humbling and enthralling; and so, also in the same way, is the outrageous coupling on the couch in *A Charmed Life* of the remarried young wife and her former husband. The heroine, in these encounters, feels a sense of piercing degradation, but it does not destroy her mind's freedom to speculate; her rather baffling surrenders do not vanquish her sense of her conqueror's weaknesses and absurdities.

Of course, these works are comedies; and it is part of Mary McCarthy's originality to have written, from the woman's point of view, the comedy of Sex. The coarse actions are described with an elaborate *verismo* of detail. (The safety pin holding up the underwear in the train scene; in *A Charmed Life* 'A string of beads she was wearing broke and clattered to the floor. 'Sorry,' he muttered as he dove for her left breast.' The 'left' notation is a curiosity, a kind of stage direction, inviting us to project ourselves dramatically into an actual scene.)

Plot and dramatic sense are weak in Mary McCarthy's fiction. Taste and accuracy are sometimes substitutions. What people eat, wear, and read are of enormous importance. The reader follows the parade of tastes and preferences with a good deal of honest excitement and suspense, wondering if he can guess the morals of one kind of person who would cover a meat loaf with Campbell's tomato soup. He participates in a mysterious drama of consumption, in which goods are the keys to salvation. Taste is also used as the surest indication of character."

Elizabeth Hardwick

"Mary McCarthy" (1961)
American Fictions
(Modern Library 1999) 207, 209

"The scene in the berth was the making of Mary McCarthy. It became the cornerstone of a celebrity that was to far surpass any recognition she had received from the pieces with Margaret Marshall or her 'Theater Chronicles.' Meg Sargent's one-night stand with a fat middle-aged traveling salesman was shocking in its day, and it has not ceased to elicit strong responses even now. For *Partisan Review*, bringing it out showed an uncharacteristic generosity of spirit--or an astonishing lack of self-awareness....

William Phillips: 'We knew the story was going to be shocking. That was part of my hesitation. To be that brazen in our editorial policy. In that time for publishing things like that you could get into trouble with the postoffice authorities. We then were tax exempt, if I remember correctly. You could lose your tax exemption. You could lose your second-class rights. It was a risk.'

Lionel Abel: 'I don't think that she ever wrote anything else that was as true a confession, that had as much meaning, that was as well written, that had that kind of import. It's really one of the best American short stories. It should be in any anthology."

Clement Greenberg: 'I was on the magazine when the story came in, and I thought, Well done, but it's middle-brow stuff. And then I reread it years later and I thought, Well done--better done than I'd realized.'

Pauline Kael: 'Mary McCarthy really was the culture heroine of my generation. And I felt how different things were now when I watched that 'Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt' on television. It's very well done. Elizabeth McGovern is hip and smart in the central role. What's missing is the importance the story had when it first appeared. In the 1940s it was wonderfully giddy and daring. It was tonic. It was the story that bright people--women especially--talked about and identified with. This was a feminist heroine who was strong and foolish; it was before feminist writing got bogged down in victimization. She was asinine but she wasn't weak. I looked at the reviews of the television production and the people writing about it didn't seem to get it at all.'

Alison Lurie: 'It's hard now to realize how shocking it was at the time. The attitude toward men. That you could have a relationship with a man just for the fun of it and you didn't have to feel guilty or upset or anything like that.'

Saul Bellow: 'I remember reading the story and coming across those sentences that say in effect: She lay like a piece of white lamb on a sacrificial altar. "Bullshit," I said.'

Alfred Kazin: 'There was a contempt for men in Mary's writing, which I thought was rather unpleasant. Describing her heroine's intercourse on the train, she says she waited for the man to exhaust himself. It was as if she was not involved.'

George Plimpton: 'I read it when I was sixteen, because all of the women I knew wanted me to read it. At that age what stunned me was that people could write about things like that. The candor. And also the fact that somebody had printed such a thing so explicitly. Everybody talked about it. I was at Exeter at the time and it made almost as much an impression as Pearl Harbor.'

To be sure, Meg Sargent comes off little better than the trolls she has surrounded herself with. Certainly she is not permitted to walk away from her one-night stand scot-free.... For more than one generation of young women, Meg Sargent, with her bravado and underpants held together with a safety pin, would become a personal heroine. But the story had an immediate and striking effect on three young women who went on to become writers themselves [Eileen Simpson, Pauline Kael, Alison Lurie]"

Frances Kiernan
Seeing Mary Plain: A Life of Mary McCarthy
(Norton 2000) 179-81, 184, 186-89

"The collection, as a whole, [is] more a sequence of static moments than a larger, organic and novelistic trajectory. Such an observation might seem merely a generic quibble, but McCarthy's use of stasis and containment is essential to the social critiques that her stories articulate and can be seen particularly in the case of 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Shirt,' a story that had earlier been published in the *Partisan Review* and that develops a sustained critique of the contemporary discourse around identity.

McCarthy's choice of setting immediately suggests a predominating theme of enclosure; almost all of the story takes place over a single train ride, beginning with the protagonist's observation that 'The man who came into the club car was coatless.' Although she immediately rules him 'Out of the Question,' the way that she conceptualizes the 'trip West' as a discrete space, outside of the normal flow of time, implies an understanding of identity as contingent upon context and suggests a desire to make the most of the opportunity to act outside of normal societal restrictions--she feels 'a curious, shamefaced disappointment, as if she had given a party and no guests had come.'

McCarthy consistently emphasizes the claustrophobia of the train's confined spaces, playing on the resonances of the word 'compartment'--as when the eponymous man invites her back to his--and the suspension of normal social codes--as when, 'in the cultural atmosphere of the Pullman train,' the author Vincent Sheean became 'a titan,' rather than someone to be disdained. This sense of physical segregation is exacerbated by the affair into which the married man, a sales rep from a Cleveland steel company in monogrammed Ivy League attire, inexorably draws her. As their flirting and intimacy grow, the protagonist begins to feel trapped in a 'whole strange factory,' with the sense that 'she did not know how to turn it off'--transforming her into the raw material that her interlocutor processes and transforms. In spite of her earlier disappointment, she recognizes that 'a compartment was something she had not counted on'; McCarthy's wording suggesting that the man's sexual aggression is placing her into a state of unwanted confinement.

Such a reading is reinforced by the protagonist's own frustration at being coerced into a constricting role, which emphasizes the intersection between physical and social constraint. Forced to decide on whether to accompany him to her room, 'she felt bitterly angry with the man for having exposed her--so early--to this supreme test of femininity,' she reveals her own sense of being forced into one of two compromising positions: 'she would either go into the compartment, not wanting to (and he would known this and feel contempt for her malleability), or she would stay out of the compartment, wanting to have gone in (and he would know this, too, and feel contempt for her timidity).' Once they have slept together, rather than subsiding, this containing pressure increases; McCarthy repeats the motif of enclosure within the sheets of the bed, the attended bath on the train, and within the developing relationship. The man shows a fetishist obsession, viewing her as a 'rabbit's foot,' and wants to 'keep her in an apartment in New York.' However, McCarthy does not limit this containment to her female character; when, in the brief epilogue outside the train journey, the man comes to visit the woman in New York, he feels 'claustrophobia' in her Greenwich Village apartment, trapped in an environment of which he is not in control.

The initial freedom that McCarthy's protagonist feels outside of the normal social conditions afforded by the train is replaced with a recognition of the limitations that the developing relationship places on her identity. In what could be considered a neurotic register, she obsesses about roles, types, and classifications; at one point she admits that she is interested in the man because he might be 'the one who could tell her what she as really like.' And the story is charged with an almost schizoid dynamic, as she longs for the man to confirm her identity but resists the characterizations he tries to impose on her. As her biography is revealed--a biography that echoes McCarthy's own--it is revealed that this drive dates back to a rejection of the Catholic faith: 'when she rejected the Church's filing system...she had given away her sense of herself.' Although, in their first conversation, she attempts to convey a certain appearance, 'sustaining her end of a well-bred, well-informed, liberal conversation,' his remarks force her into an extreme posture, in which she feels confined--'he had trapped her features in an expression of utter snobbery.' She appears most comfortable when her persona remains fluid, as when they are talking in his compartment, but with the door open 'exactly as if they were drinking in a show window.' Here she can maintain an open, unrestricted identity, where, 'if for the people outside she was playing the great lady, for the man across the table she was the Bohemian Girl.'

It is during this brief moment of equilibrium that McCarthy's prose reaches its highest lyricism, through free indirect discourse that suggests a moment of almost beatific personal revelation: 'As these multiple personalities bloomed on the single stalk of her ego, a great glow of charity, like the flush of life, suffused her.' The 'idylls' of this revelation is shattered, along with any hope for the future of the affair, when near the end of the journey she finally realizes that he has been continuing to understand her as a type. When he declares that he does not love her because she is 'a Bohemian,' but because she is 'underneath all that...just a sweet little girl,' this assertion clarifies their relationship for her, affirming that it was based simply on a 'misunderstanding.' Her ultimate refusal to be bound to a type is signaled when, in the final sentences of the story, she tears up a letter from him, as 'it would have been dreadful if anyone had seen it,' thus tying her to another's closed perception of her identity.

Despite her own resistance to classification, McCarthy's protagonist is nonetheless fully aware of her own tendency to class others by type, particularly them an whose perspective she rejects. The title of the story itself suggests a type of man--one who would wear a brand of clothing associated with a certain Ivy League education and lifestyle--and in interviews, McCarthy has reinforced this view, describing the story as 'the one about the Yale man.' Conscious of her own attempts to understand the man in terms of a restricted identity--to 'whitewash him'--the protagonist acknowledges that she is attracted to him 'on the basis of one or two assumptions, both of them literary: (a) that the man was a frustrated socialist, (b) that he was a frustrated man of sensibility, a kind of Sherwood Anderson character.' Using a phrase that reinforces the artificiality of such constraints, however, McCarthy suggests the hypocrisy of such a position, as the man's actual 'personality kept popping up, perversely, like a jack-in-the-box, to confound these theories.'

Shifting tack, she offers him alternative roles that he could play--unconscious here of the extent to which her actions mirror his and instead of believing that 'she was offering to release him from the chains of habit, and he was standing up and clanking those chains comfortably, and impudently in her face.' The irony of her recognition that 'she knew...that somewhere in his character there was the need of release' is that her plan for this release is her own constraining image of how he should be. So although on a surface level, McCarthy's narrative could be read as a straight protest against the limitations that social conventions place on identity, the satirical edge of her portrait of the protagonist suggests that, in fact, such confinements are inevitable and identity is necessarily limited, the possibility of fluidity cut off by the exigencies of human interaction.

This critique reflects McCarthy's own fascination, as a critic, with works that could present a narrative through a patterned, compressed structure--a perspective that contrasted so clearly with her contemporaries, as their reviews of *The Company She Keeps* attests. Such a pessimistic alignment of claustrophobic structure and regressive narrative movement ran directly against the critical priorities that emerged in midcentury American critical culture. While the Great Depression had led to government initiatives designed to reinvest Americans' faith in their nation on an abstract level, it was the threat of the ideological conflict that culminated in the Second World War that impelled cultural critics to increasingly argue for a model of fiction oriented around the articulation of individual freedom--a tendency that was exacerbated by the cultural politics of the Cold War....

This kind of position was similarly adopted by critics like Trilling and Rahv, as well as more broadly by venues like *Partisan Review*.... McCarthy's critique of the naive possibility for individual freedom of identity, uninflected by social conditions, jarred with her cultural context. Using a form of the short story that was emphasized by its closure and containment, moreover, her writing could be read as a resistance to the imposition of political agenda onto literary expression.... McCarthy's approach in *The Company She Keeps*--ostensibly acquiescing to these demands, then undermining them from within--exemplifies her insurgent spirit."

Sam V. H. Reese
The Short Story in Midcentury America
(Louisiana State University 2017) 73-76

"The stories McCarthy wrote while married to [Edmund] Wilson fit the compliment he'd given to [Dorothy] Parker's work: they had the same quality of having been written by someone who felt an 'urgent necessity to write.' The first she'd publish was called 'The Man in the Brooks Brothers Suit' [shirt]. It was

the first tale of Meg Sargent, McCarthy's alter ego, which saw the character taking the train to Reno to divorce a first husband. On the train she meets a boring, married midwestern businessman. Ultimately she sleeps with him, but ambivalently, even with regret. Throughout the encounter, Meg Sargent is watching herself, evaluating her own actions. 'It was true, she was always wanting something exciting and romantic to happen,' she muses at the beginning. 'But it was not really romantic to be the-girl-who-sits-in-the-club-car-and-picks-up-men.' She does precisely that anyway, in part because she likes to make such exercises of her sexual power. Meg is pretty, but she is not precisely vain about it. She knows she is pretty only to a certain kind of American man:

> 'At bottom, she was contemptuous of the men who had believed her perfect, for she knew that in a bathing suit at Southampton she would never have passed muster, and though she had never submitted herself to this cruel test, it lived in her mind as a threat to her. A copy of Vogue picked up at the beauty parlor, a lunch at a restaurant that was beyond her means, would suffice to remind her of her peril. And if she had felt safe with the different men who had been in love with her it was because--she saw it now--in one way or another they were all of them lame ducks... Somehow each of them was handicapped for American life and therefore humble in love. And was she too disqualified, did she really belong to this fraternity of cripples, or was she not a sound and normal woman who had been spending her life in self-imposed exile, a princess among the trolls?'

Rahv was presumably one of the 'trolls' she meant, but he took no apparent offense. They knew the story would raised something of a scandal. Its explicitness was completely unusual for its time. That only whetted the appetite to publish it, and the payoff proved worth it. 'I was at Exeter at the time,' George Plimpton told one of McCarthy's biographers. 'And it made almost as much an impression as Pearl Harbor.' Men often complained that the portraits of themselves in McCarthy's fiction were too harsh. Though Vladimir Nabokov, who happened to be a friend of Wilson's, loved the eventual collection of Mary's stories: 'a splendid thing, poetic, clever and new,' A very young aspiring writer named Norman Mailer, still then at Harvard, loved it too.

Women tended to like the story because they related to Meg's independence of mind, to her self-assurance, as well as to her mistakes. 'This was a feminist heroine who was strong and foolish,' Pauline Kael remembered thinking at the time, when she read it as a struggling film writer on the West Coast. 'She was asinine but she wasn't weak.' The nuance was hard to capture. But the quality Meg had, of being opinionated and self-assured without quite being right all the time, was an uncommon combination in feminine archetypes. In films and books, women were only rarely permitted to be both brash and vulnerable.

The story was so successful that within a year of its publication McCarthy put out a whole book of stories about Meg called *The Company She Keeps.* It was her first book, and it met with some rapturous reviews, almost all of which made McCarthy out to be a kind of murderer by prose. 'Its satire is administered as gently and as murderously as a cat administers death to a mouse,' wrote the *New York Times* reviewer. The (male) books columnist of the *New York Herald Tribune* declared that he believed McCarthy had 'a gift for delicate malice,' though he also called Meg a 'spoiled darling.' At the *New Republic*, Malcolm Cowley himself took it on, at first seeming to dislike the tone of the book's first four episodes:

> 'Clever and wicked, but not quite wickedly clever; psychologically acute, but never seemed to go much below the surface... And the heroine who keeps such bad company is perhaps the worst of the lot--the most snobbish and affected and spiteful, the least certain that she has any personality of her own, or even exists outside the book that she keeps rewriting.'

Reasonable people might differ as to whether Meg is snobbish or affected or spiteful, or merely young. Meg goes to see a psychoanalyst and discovers that most of her confusions and pretensions relate back to a horrific childhood--the 'poor biography' she was always showing the door. She walks out of that office

prepared to 'detect her own frauds.' Cowley saw, in a way other reviewers did not, how much this turned the whole book on its head: 'Miss McCarthy has learned the difficult art of setting everything down as it might have happened, without telling a single self-protective lie.... *The Company She Keeps* is not a likable book, nor is it very well put together. but it still has the unusual quality of having been lived.'

As Cowley may or may not have known, the book had, indeed, been lived. The autobiographical nature of the stories isn't really in dispute. Details were fudged, but not the essentials. Meg, like McCarthy, is a girl from the West. She has a dead parent and had a deprived childhood but is trying to make her name in New York as a writer. Her marriage has fallen apart in the same manner McCarthy's first marriage did: there was another man in the picture. She has the same kind of first job, the same kinds of friends, and the same kinds of lovers as McCarthy did in her youth. 'I don't think that she ever wrote anything else that was as true a confession,' the critic Lionel Abel once said, though he was no fan of hers.

McCarthy was in any event up to something a little different. While nowhere near as self-lacerating as Parker's, her fiction tended to be critical. To the extent it reflected her own experiences, she was clearly standing outside them, evaluating them and evaluating herself, and then fictionalizing events according to the judgments she made. The self-awareness of the fiction was something entirely different from the tone of confessional work generally: something arch, aloof, honest but ruthlessly so.... In 1944, after seven years of fights and arguments that had inspired [a] series of brilliant stories, McCarthy finally left Wilson."

Michelle Dean
Sharp: The Women Who Made an Art of Having an Opinion
(Grove 2018) 111-14

Michael Hollister (2020)