

the company she keeps mary mccarthy

the company she keeps mary mccarthy is a phrase that conjures images of intellectual circles, sharp wit, and a formidable literary presence. Mary McCarthy, a towering figure in 20th-century American literature, was as renowned for her incisive prose and critical essays as she was for the influential people who populated her life and her work. This article delves into the rich tapestry of relationships, friendships, and intellectual alliances that shaped Mary McCarthy's career and personal experiences, exploring how "the company she keeps" was not merely a backdrop but an active participant in her literary output. We will examine her formative intellectual relationships, her engagement with prominent political and artistic movements, and the ways in which her personal connections directly influenced the themes and characters in her celebrated novels and non-fiction. Understanding the circles Mary McCarthy moved in provides a crucial lens through which to appreciate the depth and breadth of her significant contributions to literature and public discourse.

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The Intellectual Crucible of Mary McCarthy's Early Years

Mary McCarthy's intellectual journey began long before she achieved widespread literary fame. Her early life was marked by exposure to a vibrant, albeit often tumultuous, intellectual environment. Orphaned at a young age, she was raised by her maternal grandparents in Seattle, Washington, where she received a rigorous education that fostered a deep appreciation for literature and critical thinking. This formative period laid the groundwork for her later engagement with the dominant intellectual currents of her time.

The seeds of her sharp observational skills and her uncompromising moral compass were sown in these early years, influenced by a generation of thinkers and writers who valued rigorous debate and intellectual honesty. The company she kept, even in her youth, was one that encouraged questioning and intellectual exploration.

Formative Friendships and Literary Debates

Upon arriving in New York City, Mary McCarthy quickly became immersed in the burgeoning literary and intellectual scene. Her intelligence and formidable personality drew her into circles that were shaping American culture and thought. These early friendships were not merely social; they were crucial intellectual sparring grounds where ideas were tested, refined, and often fiercely debated. McCarthy's relationships during this period were instrumental in developing her unique voice and her critical acumen. She engaged with fellow writers, critics, and thinkers, forming alliances that would last for decades and significantly contribute to the intellectual ferment of the era. The very nature of these connections fueled her desire to write and to articulate her observations with clarity and conviction.

The Vassar College Influence

Mary McCarthy's time at Vassar College proved to be a pivotal experience in shaping the company she would keep throughout her life. It was here that she encountered individuals who would become lifelong friends and intellectual companions, many of whom would also go on to make their mark in various fields. These early intellectual bonds forged at Vassar provided a foundation for the sophisticated social and literary networks she would later navigate. The rigorous academic environment, coupled with the vibrant social life, exposed McCarthy to a diverse range of perspectives and solidified her passion for literature and intellectual engagement. The friendships formed during these college years often carried significant weight in her subsequent life and career, influencing her understanding of human nature and societal dynamics.

Early Literary Collaborations and Exchanges

In the early stages of her career, Mary McCarthy actively participated in literary collaborations and engaged in lively exchanges with her peers. These interactions were not limited to casual conversation; they often involved direct engagement with each other's work, providing constructive criticism and fostering a sense of shared purpose. The intellectual generosity and critical rigor that characterized these relationships were essential for her development as a writer. The company she kept during these formative years provided a vital support system and a constant stimulus for her creative endeavors. These early dialogues and collaborations helped to hone her analytical skills and solidified her commitment to

producing substantive and insightful literary work.

Navigating the Bohemian and Intellectual Milieu

New York City in the mid-20th century was a hub of artistic and intellectual activity, and Mary McCarthy found herself at the heart of it. She moved through bohemian circles, engaging with artists, writers, critics, and political activists. This environment, rich with diverse perspectives and passionate discourse, provided fertile ground for her literary explorations. The company she kept in these vibrant settings offered her a constant stream of observations about human behavior, societal trends, and the complexities of political and social movements. Her ability to dissect and articulate the nuances of these interactions became a hallmark of her writing.

The Partisan Review Circle

Perhaps one of the most significant intellectual affiliations Mary McCarthy held was with Partisan Review. This influential journal became a vital platform for intellectual debate, and McCarthy was a prominent contributor. The editors and writers associated with Partisan Review formed a tight-knit intellectual community that engaged with the pressing issues of the day, from politics and philosophy to art and literature. McCarthy's participation in this circle provided her with a consistent outlet for her sharp critical essays and solidified her reputation as a formidable intellectual voice. The company she kept within the Partisan Review milieu was characterized by a commitment to rigorous analysis and a willingness to challenge established orthodoxies.

Engagement with Political and Social Movements

Mary McCarthy was not an observer detached from the world; she was an active participant and critic of the political and social movements of her time. The company she kept often included individuals deeply involved in these arenas, providing her with firsthand insights and fueling her passionate engagement. Whether discussing the nuances of Cold War politics, the civil rights movement, or feminist discourse, McCarthy's associations informed her understanding and her sharp, often provocative, commentary. Her ability to translate complex political and social realities into compelling prose was deeply influenced by the individuals with whom she engaged and the debates she participated in.

The Role of Relationships in McCarthy's Literary Themes

The intricate web of relationships in Mary McCarthy's life was not merely anecdotal; it served as a profound source of inspiration and thematic material for her literary works. The dynamics of friendship, marriage, intellectual rivalry, and political allegiance provided her with a rich palette from which to draw characters, conflicts, and profound insights into human nature. The company she kept, both personally and intellectually, directly shaped the narratives she told and the questions she explored. Her novels often delve into the complexities of interpersonal connections, the compromises people make, and the search for authenticity within social structures.

Exploration of Marriage and Morality

McCarthy's personal experiences with multiple marriages and complex romantic entanglements undoubtedly informed her unflinching explorations of marital relationships and their moral dimensions. Her novels often dissect the power dynamics, betrayals, and societal expectations that shape these unions. The company she kept within the context of her own romantic life provided her with a deep understanding of the intricacies and challenges inherent in committed relationships. She was able to translate these observations into characters and situations that resonated with readers for their authenticity and psychological depth.

The Intellectual and Social Critique of Her Circle

A significant aspect of Mary McCarthy's literary output was her incisive critique of the intellectual and social circles she inhabited. Through her fiction and essays, she offered often unvarnished portraits of the ambitions, hypocrisies, and vanities of the people she knew. The company she kept, from fellow writers to prominent intellectuals, became subjects of her keen observation and sharp wit. This critical engagement, while sometimes controversial, was a testament to her commitment to intellectual honesty and her belief in the power of literature to hold a mirror up to society.

Key Figures in Mary McCarthy's Literary Circle

Mary McCarthy's life was graced by the presence of many remarkable individuals who left an indelible mark on her work and her thinking. Understanding these key figures provides a richer appreciation of the intellectual ecosystem she navigated. From her early intellectual mentors to her contemporaries and collaborators, the company she kept was a constellation of brilliant minds, each contributing to the vibrant tapestry of her literary journey. These relationships offered her both camaraderie and a constant challenge,

pushing her to refine her ideas and her prose.

- Edmund Wilson: A significant intellectual mentor and later husband, Wilson introduced McCarthy to a wider literary world and influenced her critical thinking.
- Hannah Arendt: A profound philosophical friendship, McCarthy and Arendt engaged in deep intellectual discussions that informed both their work.
- Dwight Macdonald: A close friend and fellow critic associated with *Partisan Review*, Macdonald shared McCarthy's commitment to intellectual rigor and social commentary.
- Philip Rahv: Co-editor of *Partisan Review*, Rahv was a key figure in the intellectual milieu that nurtured McCarthy's early career.
- Alfred Kazin: A fellow critic and intellectual, Kazin was part of the same vibrant literary circles as McCarthy.

The Political Landscape and McCarthy's Associations

Mary McCarthy's intellectual engagement extended beyond the purely literary; she was deeply attuned to the political currents of her time. The company she kept included individuals actively involved in political discourse and activism, from anti-fascist movements to critiques of American foreign policy. Her sharp observations and often controversial stances on political matters were informed by these associations and her own rigorous analysis. She was unafraid to confront political ideologies and power structures, and her connections provided her with both a platform and a rich source of material for her critiques. Her participation in debates surrounding major political events of the 20th century highlights the crucial role of her intellectual and social networks.

Critique of Communism and American Politics

McCarthy's critical examination of communism, both domestically and internationally, was a significant aspect of her political engagement. Having witnessed firsthand the complexities and disillusionments associated with various political ideologies, the company she kept provided her with diverse perspectives on these issues. Her famous 1967 essay "The Exploding Church" and her later writings on Vietnam demonstrate a willingness to question prevailing narratives and to hold powerful institutions accountable. Her associations with individuals who held differing views on these matters allowed for a nuanced and

often challenging dialogue that informed her sharp political commentary.

Vietnam War and Intellectual Dissent

The Vietnam War served as a focal point for considerable intellectual dissent, and Mary McCarthy was at the forefront of this critical engagement. Her extensive reporting and essays on the war, often characterized by their meticulous detail and moral outrage, were shaped by the company she kept—activists, journalists, and fellow intellectuals who shared her deep concerns. Her willingness to travel to Vietnam and to offer firsthand accounts, often contradicting official narratives, solidified her reputation as a courageous and uncompromising voice. The network of individuals who actively opposed the war provided her with support, information, and a shared sense of purpose.

McCarthy's Critical Lens on Her Contemporaries

One of Mary McCarthy's most striking characteristics was her fearless and often unsparing critical lens, which she turned not only on society but also on her fellow writers and intellectuals. The company she kept was, in essence, the subject matter for much of her most celebrated work. She possessed an extraordinary ability to dissect motivations, expose pretenses, and articulate the subtle nuances of human interaction within these elite circles. Her sharp observations, delivered with wit and intellectual precision, made her both admired and feared within the literary establishment. This critical engagement with the people she knew was fundamental to her artistic project.

Literary Portraits and Character Studies

McCarthy's fiction is replete with literary portraits that drew heavily from the individuals in her orbit. Her characters, while fictionalized, often bore striking resemblances to real people, capturing their mannerisms, their intellectual arguments, and their personal foibles. The company she kept provided her with an unparalleled cast of characters, each embodying different facets of the intellectual and social landscape she so vividly portrayed. Her ability to observe and translate these human dynamics into compelling narrative made her novels resonate with readers who recognized the archetypes, even if the specific individuals remained unnamed.

The Nature of Intellectual and Artistic Ambition

Through her writings, Mary McCarthy offered profound insights into the nature of intellectual and artistic

ambition, often exploring the ways in which personal relationships and societal pressures shaped these pursuits. The company she kept, filled with individuals striving for recognition and impact, provided her with a constant source of fascination and analysis. She examined the sacrifices made, the compromises endured, and the often-tenuous balance between personal integrity and public achievement. Her work serves as a lasting testament to her keen understanding of the motivations that drive creative and intellectual endeavors.

Enduring Legacies of Association

The legacy of Mary McCarthy is intrinsically linked to the company she kept. Her life and her work are a testament to the power of intellectual community, the importance of critical dialogue, and the ways in which our relationships shape our understanding of the world and ourselves. The individuals who populated her life, from her intellectual mentors to her literary peers, contributed to the rich tapestry of her thought and her writing. By examining "the company she keeps," we gain a deeper appreciation for the formidable mind and enduring impact of Mary McCarthy on American literature and culture. Her associations were not merely social connections; they were the crucible in which her brilliant insights were forged and refined.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme or subject of Mary McCarthy's 'The Company She Keeps'?

The central theme of Mary McCarthy's 'The Company She Keeps' is a searing and often humorous exploration of intellectualism, social climbing, and the moral compromises made by ambitious young women navigating the bohemian and literary circles of New York City in the 1930s and 40s.

Who is the protagonist of 'The Company She Keeps' and what is her primary motivation?

The protagonist is Meggie, a young and ambitious woman who is seeking to establish herself within the intellectual and artistic elite. Her primary motivation is to gain social and intellectual respectability, often through associating with influential figures and participating in the prevailing intellectual currents of her time.

How does Mary McCarthy's own background and experiences inform

'The Company She Keeps'?

McCarthy's own experiences as an intellectual and social critic, having moved in similar circles, deeply inform the novel. Her sharp observations of hypocrisy, pretension, and the intellectual games played by her contemporaries are evident throughout the narrative, giving it an autobiographical flavor.

What is the significance of the title 'The Company She Keeps'?

The title 'The Company She Keeps' is a direct reference to the adage 'a man is known by the company he keeps.' McCarthy subverts this by focusing on a woman, highlighting how her associations and the circles she moves in define her social standing, intellectual identity, and moral compass within the novel's world.

What literary style is characteristic of 'The Company She Keeps'?

'The Company She Keeps' is characterized by Mary McCarthy's signature witty, analytical, and often acerbic prose. Her style is highly intellectual, employing sharp dialogue, keen psychological insight, and a satirical lens to dissect the motivations and behaviors of her characters.

What are some of the major criticisms or debates surrounding 'The Company She Keeps'?

One of the major criticisms or debates surrounding the novel revolves around its perceived elitism and the author's often critical stance towards her characters, leading some to view it as overly judgmental. The novel also sparked discussions about female ambition and the societal pressures placed upon women in intellectual spheres.

Why is 'The Company She Keeps' considered a significant work in American literature?

'The Company She Keeps' is considered a significant work for its incisive social commentary on intellectual and artistic circles, its groundbreaking portrayal of female ambition and intellectualism, and its masterful use of satire and witty prose. It offers a vivid snapshot of a particular time and place while also exploring enduring themes of identity, aspiration, and belonging.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Mary McCarthy's *The Company She Keeps*, with short descriptions:

1. *The Group* by Mary McCarthy

This novel, also by McCarthy, offers a panoramic view of the lives of eight Vassar College alumnae in the 1930s. It delves into their personal struggles, intellectual explorations, and societal expectations as they

navigate love, marriage, careers, and the complexities of post-Depression America. The book is renowned for its candid discussions of sexuality and its sharp social commentary.

2. *The Catcher in the Rye* by J.D. Salinger

While stylistically different, this novel shares *The Company She Keeps*'s focus on a young protagonist grappling with disillusionment and societal hypocrisy. Holden Caulfield's narrative voice, full of adolescent angst and critical observation, resonates with the questioning spirit of Margaret in McCarthy's work. Both characters struggle to find authenticity in a world they perceive as "phony."

3. *The Bell Jar* by Sylvia Plath

This semi-autobiographical novel explores a young woman's descent into mental illness, mirroring the internal turmoil and existential questioning that can afflict characters like Margaret. Esther Greenwood's experiences with societal pressures and her search for identity in the stifling post-war era offer a powerful parallel to the anxieties of McCarthy's protagonist. It's a poignant examination of the female psyche.

4. *Revolutionary Road* by Richard Yates

Yates's novel dissects the disillusionment and emptiness lurking beneath the surface of 1950s suburban American life, a theme that indirectly touches upon the societal constraints and dashed hopes experienced by characters in McCarthy's work. Frank and April Wheeler yearn for something more meaningful than their seemingly perfect lives, highlighting a shared critique of conventional aspirations. It powerfully portrays the failure to escape societal expectations.

5. *To the Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf

Woolf's modernist masterpiece, like McCarthy's novel, explores the inner lives and relationships of its characters with intricate psychological depth. The narrative delves into the complexities of family, the passage of time, and the search for meaning, particularly through the lens of female consciousness. It shares a commitment to exploring the nuanced emotional landscapes of its protagonists.

6. *Mrs. Dalloway* by Virginia Woolf

This novel follows Clarissa Dalloway as she prepares for a party, weaving together her present experiences with reflections on her past. Similar to *The Company She Keeps*, it offers a profound look at a woman's internal world, her regrets, and her attempts to define herself within societal norms. The stream-of-consciousness style allows for a deep immersion into the protagonist's consciousness.

7. *The Age of Innocence* by Edith Wharton

Set in the rigid social world of New York's Gilded Age, Wharton's novel scrutinizes the suffocating pressures of class and convention on individuals, particularly women. Newland Archer's internal conflict and May Welland's constrained existence echo the societal limitations and personal sacrifices that characters in McCarthy's novels might face. It's a masterful depiction of societal expectations and their impact on private lives.

8. *Less Than Zero* by Bret Easton Ellis

This novel offers a stark, often brutal, portrayal of wealthy, disaffected youth in 1980s Los Angeles. While

more explicit in its depiction of decadence, it shares with *The Company She Keeps* a critical examination of a specific social milieu and the moral ambiguity of its inhabitants. The characters grapple with ennui, moral decay, and a profound sense of alienation.

9. *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* by Flannery O'Connor

O'Connor's collection of short stories, known for its dark humor and Southern Gothic sensibility, often features characters confronting moral crises and the complexities of faith. The unflinching look at flawed individuals and their sometimes violent encounters with grace or damnation resonates with the often morally ambiguous and challenging situations faced by characters in McCarthy's fiction. It explores the human condition with a sharp, often unsettling, gaze.

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