The Group Short Guide

The Group by Mary McCarthy

BOOKRAGS

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Characters

Kay, because she begins the narrative with her marriage and ends it with her death, serves as a focal point to unite all the characters in The Group, whose reactions to and relationships with Kay reveal their own priorities.

Both a type and an individual — everywornan — Kay is clever but without common sense, attractive but not impossibly beautiful. Somewhat of an outsider, she is the girl-next-door, full of small-town prospects, who gets the advantages of an Ivy League education, goes off to conquer the Big Apple, and pins her hopes to a young man's fortunes. Although an "outsider" from the Midwest, Kay has adopted the standards of "modernity" and trendiness with a goodhearted curiosity and brightness, a combination of the naive romantic and the more worldly cosmopolitan. Her husband Harald (who shares McCarthy's first husband's name and profession), although brilliant and articulate, is moody and egocentric, delighting in manipulation and deception. As their marriage gradually disintegrates, abuse both physical and emotional appears, until Harald has Kay wrongfully committed. At her funeral in the final scene (Kay falls out of a window in the Vassar Club trying to get a glimpse of a fighter plane on the eve of World War II), Harald receives his due from Lakey, whose aesthetic sensibilities (she has been in Italy studying art) and lesbianism afford her a detached stance from which to judge.

For all their advantages and selfassurance, women such as Kay, with their enthusiasm and candor, are curiously vulnerable, open to exploitation from the self-serving or the openly neurotic, whose calculation they do not comprehend. Others, because they are more firmly grounded in selfhood, more "at home" in their environment, are able to maintain their equilibrium through failed love affairs and that particularly modern encounter, the "one night stand." Dotty Renfrew, whose "defloration" in Chapter Two was perhaps responsible for the book's notoriety, maintains her selfhood despite her encounter. Dotty, who appears Boston proper but discovers the awesome sexual responsiveness read of in Masters and Johnson, is of course a stock type. Dotty, however, stands up for selfhood and dignity when, after going to a birth control clinic upon her would-be lover's command, abandons her paraphernalia under a bench and returns to a more protected, dignified self. Polly Andrews, whose family has lost its money and whose clinically manic-depressive father comes to live with her, marries a nice young doctor even after her disappointing affair with a spineless editor. Both Polly and Dotty have the combination of good sense and good heart which makes for survival.

On the other hand, some characters are too insular or too egocentric to profit from their encounters or to escape their solipsism. Pokey Prothero, the dumb horsey type, who wants to be a veterinarian, never escapes the mindless society rut. Norine Schmittlap Blake, whose name reflects McCarthy's way with labels, goes from left activism (McCarthy's own Trotskyists) to a kind of Margaret Mead earth-mother syndrome. But perhaps most harshly dealt with of all is Libby McAusland, the literary one, whose blend of annoying mannerisms ("red open mouth, continuously gabbling"), self-centeredness,

and conceit render her the only one of the group not to share its essentially positive qualities.

The spokeswomen for McCarthy's standards are primarily Helena Davison, whose sprightly androgynous quality and perverse self-containment makes her removed from the passionate turmoil around her, and, at the end of the novel, Lakey, whose distance, being a lesbian and art critic from Chicago, allows her to stand up for form, ruling principles, and a lack of sentimentality.

The women of The Group are just enough removed in terms of time and social class to make them seem quaint, distanced. They are upper class, "high hat," yet with middle-class values, just the kind of people about whom readers feel interest and a slight superiority.

On the other hand, the deft portrayal of right and wrong ways to act provides a benchmark for a mobile society looking for traditional manners, if not traditional mores.

Social Concerns

The Group addresses manners, social codes, and conventions both old and new among a group of Vassar students after their graduation in 1933 (McCarthy's college and year). Against the backdrop of the Depression, an array of urban lifestyles appears in settings from Boston to New York: the political crowd, the theater and art group, and the horsey society types.

Larger social changes are reflected in everyday culture as the friends meet adulthood and the Big Apple. In domestic life and contemporary manners, cocktails and progressive ideas are the norm, as well as casseroles rather than meat-and-potatoes, apartments rather than parlors. One does one's own cooking, and husbands even share shopping and chopping with their wives. Everyone is struggling professionally — as an actor or writer, in the professions or business. The darker side of the economic picture is not missing — unemployment, families newly fallen into the middle class with the stock market Crash, East Side walk-ups rather than country houses.

But it was change not in kitchen gadgets but in sexual mores which won the novel its early notoriety. Not only the subject matter — contraception, divorce, pre- and extra-marital intercourse, masturbation, even lesbianism — but also the attitude, was daring.

The young women, although still "nice girls," are adventuresome and curious, have little regard for the traditional coupling of sex and "love," and are not romantic in a traditional way. The narrator, too, takes an unusual objective view, detached and descriptive, like clinical analysts Masters and Johnson themselves. However, characters who become too adventuresome get their comeuppance often enough, in the form of faux pas or embarrassment, and the virtues of modesty and moderation always hold firm.

Sexuality is perhaps a metaphor for an even more primary concern for the value of human relationships and interaction. Marriage and sexual politics are on the first line in the new wave of expectations. The marriage of Kay and Harald (as he insists upon spelling it), performed without any parents or "older people" present, is in this new mold, partners working together rather than traditional "separate spheres."

Candor and openness are standards of behavior. In the shift from 1920s' frivolity and superficiality to a more earnest and searching 1930s meant for the women a search for "meaningful" relationships and personal fulfillment.

For men it meant a quest for space and for freedom from traditional roles, commitments, and obligations. When Harald goes out to buy a pickle for Kay's recipe and stays away all night, McCarthy is showcasing his sense of detachment from the traditional role of loyal husband.

Relations between generations change as well, as the young women move away from parental norms and conventions, only to rediscover, in some cases, a new relationship with their parents as individuals rather than as representatives for social standards.

Similarly, friendships among the women themselves provide continuity and a sense of bonding, no matter how vexed they might become with one another. The value of personal relationships comes in some ways to replace convention as a means of fulfillment and emotional gratification.

In all this, the idea of identity, maintaining one's selfhood and one's sense of perspective among shifting values, not rejecting change, but seeing how it fits, is the primary value. Although most of the characters in The Group negotiate these demands successfully, the darker side of their journey appears as, with the years, they encounter dimmed hopes and expectations, even isolation and loss; and, in the case of Kay, with whose marriage the novel opens, turning points include divorce, nervous breakdown, and finally death under suspicious circumstances.

Techniques

The most striking quality in McCarthy's style is her way of making characters reveal themselves and comment on one another in interior monologues set in swiftly changing short scenes. As motivation and priorities are revealed, the characters act upon one another to bring extreme notions into balance either through exposure or by example.

As the narrative structure reveals an almost neo-Thomist concern with moderation and the mean, this modern twist on the traditional morality play achieves ironic meaning.

Images and allusions contribute to the blend of modernism and classicism which makes The Group so appealing — Latin tags and the latest cocktails, principles, universals, and general ideas along with jazz singers. McCarthy's outrageous sweeping generalizations — "All the usual disorders of the repressed female brainworker," and "Like many teachers of English, he was not able to think very clearly" (in The Groves of Academe (1952), itself a Horatian setting) — are balanced with a glimpse of the unusual, unique side to the character. Her point of view is practically permissive. The good girls emerge intact (usually) and the bad girls are put in their place, albeit not overly strongly.

But perhaps the most singular quality in McCarthy's work is her tone and her perspective. Because of their comic quality tempered with terse, noncommittal description, many of her scenes are justly famous and truly hilarious — such as the well-known "fitting scene" in the contraception clinic, where the newly greased diaphragm flies right out of Dotty's hand. McCarthy's choice of detail, too, is concrete and instructive: From recipes for pate, and the proper way to clean a dishrag, to the truly tasteful funeral arrangements to match the unsettled wedding with which The Group began.

Themes

Against this background of changing mores McCarthy posits her themes — the eternal standards of right and reason, straightforwardness, goodheartedness, and natural responses in a world increasingly uncertain and affected.

These are not to be confused with mere undisciplined indulgence, as those who try too assiduously to be natural and "open," such as Norine Blake, whose affair with Harald parallels the breakup of his marriage, and whose left politics and then Margaret Mead-type naturalism is untempered with regard for the dignity and feelings of others.

Helena Davison, McCarthy's spokesperson, delivering a little lecture when Norine comes for advice about her affair with Harald, stands up for traditional virtues of courtesy and gentleness. Correct form should be preserved to save face and feelings, even when impulse is arrayed against it.

At the other extreme are those who, too repressed, prudish, or polite, are overly willing to be intimidated and ruled by others, throwbacks to a standard of gentility and conventionality which the positive side of new roles is rendering passe. One young woman's physician husband bullies her into being a "experiment" in his breast feeding crusade, preventing her from going to her crying baby, whose "schedule" he is trying to adjust. In all of these characters, the touchstone of conduct lies in identity, defining and maintaining a sense of the self which does not impose on others and does not render one inflexible, unable to respond to change and necessity. Characters who maintain this core are rewarded with serenity and certainty, while those who fail to preserve or never had it are at risk. The Group, however, is far more than a cautionary tale of the dangers of overstepping one's limits. Instead, it defines new limits or new territory which is now within limits.

Adaptations

Sidney Lumet, known for his sensitive films about domestic life, filmed The Group in 1966. The movie, although moderately successful, received scathing reviews. Its descendants, however, appear in films and novels about not the 1930s, but the 1960s such as John Sayles's Secaucus Seven and The Big Chill, where classmates again reunite.

Literary Precedents

In popular literature, McCarthy is in the tradition of courtesy books and the novel of manners such as those by Austen and, in another sense, Richardson and Fielding. Domestic affairs had been a staple for popular literature, and especially for the novel, since its beginnings. The tradition became particularly American when, in such works as East Lynne, the tale of the young girl gone wrong in the big city became a staple of popular literature.

Emily Dickinson and Edith Wharton, on the other hand, demonstrate the value and difficulty of striking out against traditional standards.

McCarthy has, however, set precedents of her own, since The Group has become a password for what is trendy and daring. One of Philip Roth's heroines openly invokes McCarthy as an authority on contraception, and the young girl-big city motif appears in the novels of Rona Jaffe.

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