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English 5092

Summary Critique #1

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Rose, Barbara. "I'll Tell You No Lies: Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and the Fictions of Authority." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 9, no. 1, 1990, pp. 107-126. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/464183.

In her essay "I'll Tell You No Lies: Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* and the Fictions of Authority," Barbara Rose analyzes the relationship between paternal and maternal narratives. More specifically, she looks at the relationship of *truth* regarding paternal and maternal narratives. Historically, the paternal narrative is the narrative that is seen as the truth—in a male-centered society, only the truth told by men is the *real* truth. Because women are nothing more than criminals and lunatics, their claims are false. A woman's truth must be fabricated due to the number of factors working against her, factors such as authority and voice. Rose argues, however, that the actual truth can be found in the relationship *between* paternal and maternal narratives. That is, these narratives must be considered together if the actual truth is to be known. She seeks proof of this claim by looking at Mary McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*.

Rose opens her essay by claiming that because woman cannot speak the truth, she "has traditionally been barred from the public discourse of the *polis*: from the active participation in the formulation of society's truths" (Rose 107). In the patriarchal society in which Rose and the reader of her article live, woman is considered both a criminal and a lunatic due to her inability to grasp the truth: she "cannot obey the truth...cannot recognize it...cannot speak it" (107).

Because of this, she has been banned from the public stratum, confined to the place where women do what women do best: the home. The home is private; it is a place of opinion. The public arena is just that—public. Because it is public, it is a place of truth. Here, then, is the issue: woman, relegated to her place in the home, “occupies the place of non-truth,” while man, an active participant in society, “can perceive the truth” (107).

This train of thought becomes an issue when it comes to the writing of autobiographies. Rose says, “[a]utobiography, the representation of a ‘known’ self, is often characterized as a testimony of truth” (107). What Rose is implying here is that because women are incompetent when it comes to truth, only autobiographies told by men are capable of containing the truth. However, if women are incapable of maintaining the concept of truth, what does that mean for autobiographies written by women? Rose argues that women are already at a disadvantage trying to write autobiographies because they are in “a false position” (108). They have to face the aforementioned forces moving against them: authority and voice. A woman’s authority is already shot—“she will be read as a woman and therefore her life story will be judged with standards different from those applied to male life stories” (108). When it comes to voice, she has some options. She can write about the public sphere, at which point “she must speak like a man,” and consequently be thought of as nothing more than a masquerader (108). *Or*, she can write about the private sphere, at which point she must use the voice of a woman, and consequently have her work thought of as nothing more than empty untruth. These circumstances make it so that attempting to write an autobiography for a woman is nearly a lose-lose situation. Rose does offer one solution, though: “a woman autobiographer needs to be a liar” (110).

So begins Rose’s analysis of Mary McCarthy’s *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. It is ironic that Rose chooses this particular autobiography to discuss the issue of truth in female

autobiographies because McCarthy's tale "is characterized by its lies, fictions, evasions, equivocations, embroideries, omissions, half-truths, and untruths" (110). McCarthy consistently lies throughout her narrative. It is not that she is lying to the reader purposely—in fact, she states in her note to the reader that everything she has written is true to the best of her memory—but in the tales she relays of herself as a child, she is a prolific liar. More often than not, McCarthy lies in order to attain something that she sees as beneficial; it is almost always a means to an end, never something she does with malicious intent. She even claims that lying, in many cases, is something that is forced upon her by the expectations of those around her. Why, then, would Rose choose the tale of a woman who ousts herself as a liar to argue about the truth in female narratives? The answer lies in *how* McCarthy lies, "for in writing her life story McCarthy speaks like both a man and a woman [...] The truth, McCarthy suggests, lies in the relationship between the two narratives" (110).

McCarthy's paternal narrative actually comes from the revision of the lies she believed about her father. Rose claims, "[w]hile male-centered autobiography is traditionally the narration of remembered victories, McCarthy's is often one of forgotten defeats" (112). The reader sees quite a reversal of Rose's initial idea (male narrative=true, female narrative=false) in McCarthy's autobiography. While readers may not have a personal account from McCarthy's father, they find out that most of what McCarthy knows about her father is romanticized. Through sheer reason and consultation with her family members, she finds out the truth of the man as she ages. In this instance, it is his male narrative, the narrative of grandeur known by McCarthy, that she discovers is the lie. On the other hand, McCarthy spins her tale as anything but grand—in fact, her narrative is filled with irony, the narrator's voice humorous as she pokes fun at her younger

self. She relays stories of defeats, not triumphs. These tales of a young girl's defeats ring truer than tales of grandeur for that young girl's father.

However, Rose is quick to point out that “[a]ttached to seven of the eight chapters are commentaries that identify and emphasize, often in their opening sentences, McCarthy’s fictions and fabrications” (112). So the reader has here a tale where the author first addresses her narrative as fact, then attempts to make corrections regarding those “facts.” What, then, is the real truth? This calls into question the entire autobiography. Surely, the reader cannot be made to believe that McCarthy points out *every* single instance of untruth in her narrative. How is the reader supposed to recognize the truth? Rose’s suggestion is that the truth “lies in the relationship between the maternal and paternal narratives, between the autobiographical chapters and the questioning and correcting commentaries” (122-123). As mentioned before, Rose believes that a woman autobiographer needs to be a liar. The issue with *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is that McCarthy does not seem to be a very good liar. Instead of spinning a tale that is beyond doubt (as a good liar would), McCarthy leaves the reader with tons of questions regarding her life and what actually happened.

While Rose’s article is quite extensive in her citations from McCarthy’s text itself, the reader still comes away from it with no clear answer as how to recognize the truth versus the untruth in McCarthy’s narrative. Rose makes a bold claim, evokes the names of other scholars in support of this claim, provides tons of textual analysis, and then...wait, what happened? The entire article is derailed by analyses of McCarthy’s relationship with the men and women in her life that are almost *too* detailed. Rose begins and finishes the article claiming that the truth in McCarthy’s text can be found in the relationship between maternal and paternal narratives, but somewhere in the middle, she gets lost. The reader comes away from the article unsure of what

the maternal and paternal narratives are, and how the truth can be found between these narratives. The reader needs McCarthy's narrative, not the narratives of the other people in her text, narratives that Rose seems to view as more important to McCarthy's development of the truth. What do these people have to do with the truth? Nothing, really. McCarthy's truth is subjective, influenced by the narrator who tells the tale and the reader who reads it. These other narratives, while clearly important to McCarthy's development as a person, do nothing to help the reader sift through the overall narrative to find the truth.

Rose's initial claim is impressive and stunning—women are criminals and lunatics, incapable of the truth. Immediately, the reader is drawn in to the article. This is a claim that, had her following mindset and argument in support of the claim not been outdated, would actually be fun to consider. The reader first knows ideas posed in Rose's essay are outdated with her use of the word "polis." While the essay was written in 1990, Rose seems to be under the impression that society is operating as an ancient Greek city-state. She claims that, like the Athenian model, women have been relegated to the home, unable and uninvited to participate in public discourse and the creation of laws. The truth is, this is a very outdated method of thinking, even in the 1990s. Rose is stuck in the past, unable to admit that, while society may still be patriarchal, women do play a role in the public sphere.

Rose does do a good job of convincing the reader that female autobiographers need to be liars, if for no other reason than to play the part expected of them. She could not have chosen a better person to speak on—one of the main issues in McCarthy's *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* is the idea of fact versus lie. McCarthy's occupation as a liar usually corresponds directly to her stages of life. As a child, lying is a means of protecting herself. As she gets older, it is a means of getting what she wants. As she is narrating this story, lying may not even be done

purposely as a means toward anything. Instead, the lying of the narrator can be seen as nothing more than a fault of memory. This brings the reader back to the idea of the *real* truth. If memory is involved, there is no way of knowing the real truth. Memory is fallible, no matter how good one's intentions may be. Rose's response to this is that, despite any issues regarding memory, the reader can find the real truth in the relationship between paternal and maternal narratives. A great claim, really, if only she had explained it better. Rose's ideas are well-supported with a good deal of textual evidence, as well as input from other scholars. However, she does not seem to prove her solution for finding the truth. This article is brimming with potential, but it falls short when it comes to providing any real answers regarding the truth in McCarthy's text.