

Lies of a Catholic Girlhood

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In her memoir *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1974), Mary McCarthy interrogates what it means to tell the truth within a memoir. She questions society's difference between truth and lie by critiquing her own memoir within the same memoir. Because of her identity as a woman, McCarthy is unable, according to some Western philosophy, to tell the truth. If her identity as a woman is ignored, the question then becomes which narrative is the definitive truth: McCarthy's childhood memories or her critiques as an adult. The idea of a definitive truth is actually not able to be created in literature, especially in memoirs. A truth negates the fallibility of memory and one's family history. In addition to being openly critical of her own memoir, McCarthy has been open with her criticism of Lillian Hellman, another memoirist, over Hellman's truth-telling in her own memoir. Both memoirists see lying differently, something that is only possible and undefinable in the context of a memoir or autobiographical work. The inability to definitively describe lying or truth-telling in memoir is also a critique of authorial intent and lying within our greater society, for it is impossible to describe authorial intent and writing as usually held under separate laws than the ones that govern daily actions in society. Despite this impossibility, lying is still frequently described in terms of authorial intent and within the bounds of the morals set out by society. This paper investigates the balance between truth and lying within memoir while placing it in context with literary theories surrounding female authorship, memoir and the consequences of lying in a memoir.

Defining truth in memoirs and autobiographies has been a debate that has divided the genre from its earliest conception. Truth within literature, once easily defined, becomes unclear when the audience believes that the events described in the narrative are events that happened in the author's life. The differences between truth, narrative truth, emotional truth and a lie are variable depending on the perspective of the memoirist and the reader. Narrative truth, while not the truth that the audience expects, is often more important to the memoirist than the truth the audience expects. Narrative truth is defined by Timothy Dow Adams in his essay "Design and Lie in American Autobiography" as being a truth that is defined by the emotional and narrative concerns of the memoirist (54). The questions about the validity of the stories and events in memoirs and autobiographies come from readers and

critics, as well as the authors themselves, and ask what truth in autobiography is and how much it matters to the overall content of the work. One of Mary McCarthy's memoirs, *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood* (1974), is often at the center of this debate. *Memories* is composed of a series of shorter, previously published essays connected by short italicized sections which give depth and background to the previous section, except for the last section which does not have an explanation. These italicized sections serve in many ways as sections that allow McCarthy to comment on the actions of her past self. By having a separation between these roles, McCarthy is able to examine and subvert the binary between truth and lie. This binary can also be seen when applying truth to men and lying to women. Throughout history, women have been seen as more irrational and therefore unable to tell the truth. Depending on the perspective of the reader or critic, McCarthy

is unable to tell the truth due to her position as a woman. If her status as a woman is ignored, the accuracy of McCarthy's narrative is obscured by the actions of others—the actions of those she is unable to control or explain, namely her family. She is at the mercy of her gender identity and the tangled history of her family.

McCarthy counters these perceptions by self-identifying as a liar early in the memoir and frequently throughout: “*This account is highly fictionalized*” is the first sentence in her third italicized section (italics original, 97). McCarthy's own characterization of herself as a liar throughout *Memories* suggests to the reader certain questions, namely: if the audience should trust that McCarthy is telling the truth when she says that she lies and whether the audience cares that McCarthy is lying or not lying. It also brings up questions about what lying actually is in the literary world and whether those lies are as grievous as those we tell in our larger society. These questions provide a framework that the audience can use to critically examine the role of lying, as either an intentional deception or as an aesthetic choice within *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, and how these half-truths work together to create the coming of age narrative found within *Memories*. Lying, while an important part of any memoir, becomes especially important when discussing *Memories* as a *bildungsroman* or a coming of age narrative. Lying in this type of work can create a feeling of a false experience for a reader who does not understand the variable relationship between truth and narrative. The process of becoming an adult is an identifiable and personal aspect of human development and the reader often finds in this moment a connection between the memoirist's writing and their own experience. When this connection is broken by a rigid definition of truth, the meaning of the text is changed and the

reader no longer has the same connection to the work as they had when they thought it followed society's unyielding definition of truth. Without the supposed connection, the reader feels alienated and the gap between the author and the reader prevents a personal reading of the text.

Truth-telling for McCarthy may be impossible, no matter what the implications are for connection with the audience. Since, according to some philosophical thought, telling the truth is impossible for women. This makes the argument of whether or not it matters that she is telling the truth non-existent. Women have been prevented from the making of the laws and “the formulations of society's truths” (Rose 107). Without an official position within the truth-telling system it can be assumed by scholars that women were excluded from these practices for a well-documented reason, like criminals and lunatics. Women were excluded from these practices because of “supposed moral and mental incompetence” because in some metaphysical Western philosophy, only men are able “to perceive the truth” (Rose 107). McCarthy is then excluded from the ability to even tell the truth, before she examines her memories and her family members' memories, by her position as a female writer and as a woman more generally. When considering McCarthy's position as a woman, scholars and readers are then unable to believe that McCarthy's childhood in *Memories* is even an approximation of the truth.

In examining her private and public lives, as she does in *Memories*, McCarthy is also lying. She cannot write her public life and experience because that is solely the area for men (Rose 108). McCarthy's focus on her family and her inner experiences prevent her memoir from completely modeling masculine forms of memoir but her interest in her family is also based in public perception, not only McCarthy's

understanding of how other people saw her, but also her parents and the rest of her family. The stories of Mary's childhood exploits, from her frequent running away to her performances at school, all were seen by those outside of her and her family. These types of experiences when written in a memoir are not considered to be feminine pursuits because they deal with an exterior perception of Mary. Historically, if she writes a distinctly feminine narrative of her interior life as a woman, she is writing only opinion, not truth, because women are unable to write true narratives (Rose 108). McCarthy's interior life is undefined by truth because there is no one besides her who knows what her true self is and it is frequently impossible for McCarthy to determine her own interior self, giving the reader a hazy approximation of what her "true self" is. Since McCarthy only gives an approximation of her interior, the self she presents is one shaped by opinion, both public and private. She does not fully represent her interiority because of its flexible nature and because of her own childhood and adolescent confusion.

The confusion over Mary's interior makes this memoir not even completely a memoir of the interior and the feminine. By these claims, it is impossible for a female author to write an autobiography because it would either be an "empty masquerade" or "mere *doxa*, or untruth" (Rose 108, 110 emphasis original). When writing her memoir of her interior and exterior selves, McCarthy argues for the existence of another truth, which is not a lie, for a lie means a concealed truth, and this second truth is not concealed (Rose 110). This second truth, which is neither a masquerade nor un-truth, is the truth that McCarthy has created from her own memories and the memories of others. All memories are biased because they are formed through one's experiences which are inherently skewed

because individual perceptions are personal. These memories are especially biased because of the young age McCarthy was when she was making many of these memories, the time between when McCarthy was child and when she was writing her memoir several years later, as well as the lying of her grandparents and the mistrust McCarthy had for the memories of her uncles and aunts. Time and bias result in the creation of this second truth, which is the only truth that McCarthy can use when writing *Memories*.

The idea of there being another truth, not a lie, is important when discussing memoirs and the fallibility of memory. There are multiple truths to every story and there are as many true stories as there are witnesses to that original act. Sidonie Smith introduces these different perspectives through different questions: "'Truth' to what? To facticity? To experience? To self? To history? To community? Truth to the said, unsaid, to other fictions (of man, of woman, of black, etc.), to the genre? And truth for what and for whom? For the autobiographer? The reader? Society?" (148). The idea that there are multiple perspectives within every person's life and every event makes it impossible to tell the truth, as there is a truth for each participant. This problem is further complicated since there is no arbitrator in the literary world to decide which person's story is the most correct. These separate, yet linked truths work together in *Memories* to create McCarthy's narrative. She not only uses her own memories when creating her narrative, but the memories of her family members. The differing narratives contradict each other and leave McCarthy feeling as though no one narrative is correct. This feeling results in the creation of her italicized sections which give background and explain why and how she lied. McCarthy includes this struggle as a way to confirm her own narrative, but to also show

how her memories are not the only memories that were created out of a situation.

The lack of a single truth can be applied to almost any autobiographer, biographer, or memoirist. However, McCarthy's situation in *Memories* has unique problems with memory and truth that stem from her childhood and early adulthood. The most prevalent factor is her lack of parents. By being an orphan, she not only lacks the parents who would be able to help her tell her story, but she is also subject to bias, as "the orphan [who] is the 'great artificer,' an accomplished liar" (Rose 114). This stereotype of orphans becomes a large part of Mary's storyteller persona: due to her upbringing as an orphan living with an aunt and uncle, she is forced to become a liar and a "deceitful storyteller" (Rose 114). When describing her life with her aunt and uncle, McCarthy remembers that, no matter whether she had actually done something wrong or not, she was punished and was punished for all of her younger brothers' misdeeds as well. McCarthy writes "what I learned from this, in the main, was a policy of lying and concealment; for several years after we were finally liberated, I was a problem liar" (65). Her lying as a child has made her more prone to lying as an adult and more prone to lie within her narrative. McCarthy reminds the reader frequently of her position as a liar, making her appear more trustworthy because the audience understands the problems that existed to create her as a liar. This type of position is the persona, as defined by Vivian Gornick as the establishment of who the author is within the text (quoted in Maftei 44). For McCarthy, her persona is that of the liar and the storyteller. This persona is influenced by McCarthy's childhood lying as well as her family situation and lack of parents, but it is a creation she has made for the audience. This persona is created strictly to deal with

how the story of the author's life is told (Gornick, quoted in Maftei 44). McCarthy's memoir persona is created to make the audience think about her story and the relationship she has with the truth through her persona as a liar.

McCarthy's missing parents also have a presence in their absence in McCarthy's childhood causing her to not have a personal account of their lives. McCarthy does not have a true history of her parents, due to her paternal grandparents' desire to exalt her father and degrade her mother, which results in McCarthy questioning her own memories of her parents. The perception of her father results in the exposure of the patriarchal myths of male power and importance (Rose 111). As McCarthy writes, her father is seen as a great man, while her mother was not seen as a great woman, even though her father was not as important as everyone would have liked to remember (15). The same patriarchy that perpetuated the lies about her father prevent her from telling her complete truth as a woman and also hide parts of the story, making her unable to tell her truth because she is coming from a familial history built on lies. Their absence leads McCarthy to piece the truth together on her own: "*The chain of recollection – the collective memory of family – has been broken [...] I have had to depend on my own sometimes blurry recollections, the vague and contradictory testimony of uncles and aunts, on a few idle remarks of my grandmother's before she became senile and on some letters written me by a girlhood friend of my mother's*" (5-6, italics original). McCarthy's construction of her memories from fragments left by her family makes her memory, and therefore her narrative, unreliable and hazy. These memories and stories created through fragments are necessarily blurry because they are composed from the experiences of others which contradict McCarthy's memories and

the reflections of her other relatives. What McCarthy remembers is also foggy due to the creation of memories throughout her life, creating an ever-widening fissure between her present and her past. This gap causes a distortion of these recollections because McCarthy is subjecting them to her current biases which make her memories different from how she would have presented them as a younger woman. This type of lack of continuity gives these stories the sense that they are unreliable because no family member has a memory that corresponds with the others or with McCarthy's memory. These problems make McCarthy able to only write the truth as it has been told to her through the narratives of others.

McCarthy tries to make her narrative more truthful through confessions and personal moments. "[T]he more secrets and unknown experiences she confesses about herself the more she seems to be speaking the 'truth'" (Smith 149). The audience expects the memoirist to not misrepresent their interior life and confessions because the audience trusts that no author would ever intentionally lie about what they were feeling in the moment. In these moments, the audience is no longer thinking critically about the truth behind these confessions because these experiences are not confirmable events. Unlike the exterior unconfirmable events, her inner confessions more fully represent her interior self. While this self has been constructed through the narrative that McCarthy has constructed for the reader, the reader is looking less critically at these sections because of the confessional nature of the moments. Confessions convey intimacy and intimacy creates a relationship built on trust between the memoirist and the reader. These confessions of her inner self represent an attempt to find her true self through the act of creative writing underneath the lies and half-truths she tells to herself and her family

(Leach 15). The purpose of these sections is not only an exercise in truth-telling for McCarthy, but is also a way to inform the reader and expand their understanding of McCarthy through what feels like a personal relationship with what the reader believes is McCarthy's true self.

McCarthy's true self is difficult for her to find due to the nature of her lies, as they are never complete lies, as she tells us when speaking about her relationship with her maternal grandparents: "in my representations to my grandparents, I always had the sensation of lying. Whatever I told them was usually so blurred and glossed, in the effort to meet their approval [...] I shrank, whenever possible, from the lie absolute, just as, from a sense of precaution, I shrank from the plain truth" (172). By never fully lying or fully telling the truth, McCarthy stays within a grey area of almost truth and almost lie. When McCarthy polishes her memories with half-truths, it is not to deliberately mislead the audience, but to tell a more convincing and enjoyable story (Leach 14). Her training and experience as an author require her to think more of how the story can be a better story, rather than a simple retelling of her life. It is almost expected of her that her memoir will be literarily pleasing and enjoyable. McCarthy, as a published novelist and critic, is expected to convey her knowledge of creative writing and her ability to tell a complicated, multi-faceted story. "[Amateur memoirs] claim to authenticity comes precisely from the lack of literary contrivance. In contrast the authenticity of memoirs written by the literati is predicated on their sophisticated artfulness" (Cohen 177). McCarthy-the-memoirist is expected to have a memoir written with the same amount of creativity and style as the novels written by McCarthy-the-novelist. If McCarthy did not follow her own way of writing, her memoir would be a lie because

it does not represent her as a fiction writer. The half-truths that mask McCarthy's interior work to create a better story, a story that is more emblematic of McCarthy's status as an accomplished fiction writer.

McCarthy's inner self can almost be found underneath the lies she has created, but it is strikingly different from the portrait she gives her grandparents and the one she gives her friends. She shows the reader the differences within these portraits to give the reader an approximation of herself underneath her lies. McCarthy writes, "My whole life was a lie, it often appeared to me, from beginning to end, for if I was wilder than my family knew, I was far tamer than my friends could imagine" (173). Only McCarthy knows her true self, which is variable and dependent on the moment in time. By showing us the cracks in the façades that she presents to her friends and family, she is giving her audience a different version of the truth than her friends and grandparents know, what seems to be a better approximation of the truth.

McCarthy's inability to tell the truth results from her familial history as well as her childhood of storytelling and lying, but do these lies create a narrative that the audience is unwilling to read? It is unclear whether these discrepancies and glosses are detrimental to her narrative or are just another layer to her story. To make this issue clear, scholars of memoir have devoted many articles and discussions to try and describe truth and the importance of lying in memoir, if it is important at all. This question now has the ability to erase the importance of the discussion of whether McCarthy was able to tell the truth, or if her lying was simply a product of her childhood and gender. The importance of the argument would be lost because if it does not matter whether McCarthy tells the truth or not, then it does not matter if she was able to or not, since there would be no difference between

the truth and the lie. The question of literary truth is subject to many different opinions and perspectives, as it is not defined as simply in society, when one has to "tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth" (Smith 147). What has not been decided is the nature of what "the whole truth" actually is. The narrow concept of truth as how it is defined in society makes most memoirs inaccurate and a series of lies, when they represent a different kind of truth in the intersection of the inner self and the exterior self. If we consider McCarthy's interior self as the truer expression of her self, her exterior self is constructed to make her grandparents and friends believe what McCarthy wants them to believe about her. These differing identities intersect because her interior self informs, and is the original source for, the creation of her external self. McCarthy's external self is a perception of her interior self, which is hidden from outsiders, and many times from the audience, though they are given more access to the internal than those she knows outside of her mind.

While lying in the literary world may not be as serious as it is in society, it can have legal implications. While McCarthy is open about her lying in *Memories*, she is famous for not having the same consideration when considering Lillian Hellman's memoir, saying "everything that Hellman wrote was a lie, including every 'and' and 'the'" (quoted in Leach 6). This statement was quoted from McCarthy, making it a second-hand experience for the reader. Whether this exact statement was said can be argued against, as it was paraphrased from an interview, that has been paraphrased and quoted many different times and many different ways, each representing a distinct choice of how to represent the situation, and each can be described as a different type of lie (Leach 6-7). When even the stories about lies become lies themselves, it is impossible

for those who were not present at the event as it happened to completely represent the feelings behind what was said and how the speaker intended their words to be taken. Even if someone was present when McCarthy said this it is impossible to say how McCarthy wanted her words to be taken. It is also impossible to determine whether what McCarthy intended to say is the most important part to remember or if it is more important to consider how her words were taken. If we remove McCarthy, in the same way Roland Barthes kills the author in his work “The Death of the Author,” what she said in the situation and how the audience interprets it is more important than what she wanted the audience to think. This time of ambiguity relates back to autobiographical writing because the intentions of the author can be held as the barrier between truth and lie. This barrier, however, can be seen as being challenged and overcome by the author, when their choice was to deceive the audience, who will never understand the difference or know that they should find a difference. “Even if we understand or define autobiographical writing as writing which is premised upon an author intending to truthfully recount events in their lives, we can be no surer of their ‘design or intention’ than with any other writing” (Maffei 24). McCarthy’s actual intentions will always been unknown to everyone who hears or reads about her comments. This makes what the audience wants to believe about her intentions more important than what they may have been. In this way, McCarthy’s intentions do not exist for the audience who never knew them.

McCarthy’s statement about Lillian Hellman, before its later confusion, led to a libel suit started by Hellman against McCarthy. Hellman started this suit because McCarthy was asked which writers she felt were overrated or that “we could do without” (Dick Cavett quoted in Leach 5).

McCarthy said “The only one I can think of is a holdover like Lillian Hellman, who I think is tremendously overrated, a bad writer and a dishonest writer” (quoted in Leach 5). McCarthy went on to respond to the question about what about Hellman’s writing was dishonest by saying “Everything. [...] I said once in an interview that every word she writes is a lie including ‘and’ and ‘the’” (quoted in Leach 5). The creation of the libel suit led McCarthy to have to change what she meant by a lie. “Again it is a rhetorical exaggeration, that nothing in her writing rings true to me. That does not mean her writing is made up of literal lies. And I don’t mean *literally* nothing when I say ‘nothing in her writing rings true.’ [...] I mean the general tone of unconvincingness and falseness” (quoted in Leach 8, emphasis original). McCarthy’s definition of lying, in this context at least, is more of a misrepresentation of the self and its intentions. The literal lies McCarthy describes can be defined as deliberate misrepresentations of events that can be confirmed through the written record or through research. The general tone and rhetorical exaggeration mentioned by McCarthy can be defined as deliberate ways of exaggerating the importance of an event to place more emphasis on an unimportant event or experience to misrepresent the memoirist’s life and make it sound more conventionally important than it was. This type of misrepresentation is prevalent because memoirists and the general public believe that lives have to be dramatic and well-known to be considered worthy of thought and discussion. Memoir, while often reserved for the people society deems important, should be used to tell the stories of all different types of people.

For McCarthy and Timothy Dow Adams, lying is based not on factual misrepresentation only, but on the intentions of the author. Adams makes use of Sissela

Bok and St. Augustine who say that the intention to mislead the audience is the difference between a lie to make a “narrative truth” out of life and a true, damaging lie (52, 55-56). This narrative truth is the truth that corresponds with the author’s lived experiences, while also making a compelling narrative that can connect with its audience. Mikela Mafeti, in her chapter on truth and trust, defines truthfulness and the truth as the following: “truthfulness describes an action or kind of behavior whereas truth is a state of affairs (of course, an unstable and not universally acknowledged state of affairs)” (22). Mafeti distinguishes between truthfulness and truth because, in her view and in McCarthy’s view, truth cannot be defined, but truthfulness is the act of telling a truth.

By defining herself as a lying storyteller within her memoir, McCarthy allows herself to have a freer relationship with the truth through the act of truthfulness and then is able to pass judgment on Hellman because Hellman has not made the same observation about herself. McCarthy also sees Hellman as making her experience testifying before the House un-American Activities Committee more heroic than it actually was. McCarthy is able to justify her own perceived heroism in a similar incident in *Memories* by making judgments as an adult against her younger self. “I walked on air, incredulously, and no doubt somewhat pompously, seeing myself as a figure from legend” (McCarthy 78). By calling her younger self “pompous” McCarthy is able to distance her adult authorial self from the younger Mary who was proud of her heroism, making her intentions more pure than Hellman’s. Especially in *Memories*, the self-reflective nature of her memoir allows McCarthy to call herself pompous and make her seem less heroic in a situation that she believes, as an adult, did not require heroism. For McCarthy, her intentions are

more honorable because she is not representing herself as being a more noble person than she was in the moment. McCarthy feels that Hellman’s misrepresentations present her in a more positive way than she should actually be portrayed. Hellman’s perceived desire to show herself as being brave is a lie to McCarthy because Hellman is directly misrepresenting herself.

McCarthy also has outside supporters who tell her that they had a similar situation that she had with Uncle Myers and Aunt Margaret, her paternal great-aunt and uncle (McCarthy 86). Outside, unaffiliated stories can confirm Mary’s account, and McCarthy’s telling of it, giving her story more credibility, making it seem like less of a lie. When outside sources are brought in to compare to Hellman’s HUAC testimony and her telling of her account, it makes her story seem like a misrepresentation of its importance. These additional testimonies make Hellman’s account less heroic and more prone to criticism that she made herself into more of a hero than she actually was at the time. These accounts give context to Hellman’s testimony, that she was not the only one who testified and that Hellman took a less heroic stance than some of her colleagues by falling back on the Fifth Amendment to maintain her silence (Leach 9). McCarthy sees this reliance as being cowardly. McCarthy directly attacks Hellman for not mentioning Sidney Buchman and Arthur Miller who also testified before HUAC as “self-aggrandizing and dishonest” (Leach 9). McCarthy is able to represent herself into a self-important little girl who knows nothing about true heroism and make Hellman an adult woman who privileges her own experiences over similar actions of others. McCarthy sees this as being in direct contrast to Hellman’s portrayal of herself because McCarthy is effacing her own experience and therefore

able to avoid her own definition of lying as misrepresentation. She sees misrepresentation only as being a representation that is more positive than the actual event, but not an incorrect representation of an event as less important than it actually was. In McCarthy's conceptualization, her obligation is to represent the situation truthfully, which is often to under-represent the situation.

McCarthy's separation from her narrative in *Memories* also gives her a platform to maintain a balance between the narrative truth and the truth of the experience. Leach, when writing about *Memories* and McCarthy's relationship to the truth, describes McCarthy's detachment as "allowing the autobiographer to speak as an author and calling attention to the autobiographical narratives as stories which yet represent a kind of truth" (22). McCarthy's and Hellman's negotiations of this balance are achieved through the italicized sections of their memoirs. Hellman, in a departure from McCarthy's view of the event, describes her feelings when she was about to testify and after she testified, in a way that made her sound nervous and afraid. "Hellman shows herself as wracked by anxiety, vomiting and sweating. She wishes she had the courage to be more defiant, to say what she had really wanted to say to the committee" (Leach 10). Hellman's sections gave her a platform to show her actions as she saw them and the anxiety she felt before she committed them. McCarthy uses her italicized sections to discredit herself and her narrative and thereby show the cracks between her experience and the narrative she is creating. These cracks between the narrative and the commentary show a more complete and vibrant portrait of the author's inner life and personality (Leach 18). The separation between the experience and the narrative allows the author, in this case McCarthy, to

explain their actions without making the text only about how she is or is not telling the truth, but still about the narrative. McCarthy's and Hellman's negotiations with the truth exemplify a larger discussion about truth within memoir and how each author can feel that they are telling the truth when others think that they are not. Each author has their way of defining truth within their narrative and how they can either show that it does not exist frequently within their work, as in the case of Mary McCarthy, or how they can not directly address their lies and then be ridiculed for their work, as Lillian Hellman was by McCarthy. The two ways of treating these similar memoirists show the reason why this discussion is important: the authors that admit that they are not telling the truth, and directly address how and why they are not, are given more freedom than those who do not give the audience an answer to the audience's question: "Are you telling the truth?"

When considering the theoretical implications of this question, the autobiographical pact, theorized by Phillippe Lejeune, tries to give a structure to this ambiguous question of whether truth matters in memoir. According to Lejeune, "[memoirs] claim to provide information about a 'reality' exterior to the text and so to submit to a test of *verification*. Their aim is [...] resemblance to the truth" (43, emphasis original). The exterior reality that McCarthy describes in *Memories* is created through her own memories and the recollections of those who witnessed the same events. This creation enables the idea that there is something beyond the text that the audience is reading; that these events actually occurred and that there is a possibility that these events could be verified or refuted. The idea is that *Memories*, by calling it a memoir, is subject to certain rules and regulations that govern how it should be studied. Lejeune continues: "[T]he implicit

or explicit contract proposed by the *author* to the *reader*, a contract which determines the mode of reading of the text and engenders the effects which, attributed to the text, seem to us to define it as autobiography” (47, emphasis original). This contract, which has meaning above being a simple pact to represent a life, means that McCarthy is bound by her description of the book as a memoir to tell the truth in every situation. When reconsidering Lejeune’s work, John Paul Eakin made an important distinction between the idea of a pact and the idea of a contract: “If it were only a matter of living indicating that someone is living up to his obligations, that he is referring to systems of conventions, fine. But the term ‘contract’ suggests that it is a matter of explicit rules, fixed and recognized in a common agreement by authors and readers” (quoted in Maftai 51). This type of contract does not exist in any specific form outside of Lejeune’s pact, which is simply a set of conventions, not an explicit contract. This lack of an explicit contract gives an author of memoir a freer relationship with the truth and the hope that she can convey what she feels to be important and necessary to the story and not try to adhere to arbitrary rules about truth.

McCarthy’s characterization of the work as a memoir does allow her slightly more freedom with the truth in defined in Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, since memoir is not able to be judged by the same standards as autobiography, but there is still a certain amount of trust that the reader has that the work is completely, or at least partially, true. Memoir, as defined by Lejeune, is not the same as autobiography because it does not study an entire life or the story of a personality (34). McCarthy’s memoir charts the development of her personality from a young age to the present-day of middle age; it is not the story of her entire personality, as it certainly continued

to change after she published *Memories*, but it is the story of the creation of her early personality. By not completely adhering to Lejeune’s strict characteristics of what an autobiography is, McCarthy is not liable if her memoir does not completely fit Lejeune’s idea of truth.

If Lejeune is not the final authority, then who is? Arguably, the reader is the party that decides whether the memoir is true or not. With the notion of truth in memoir as a contract signed by the author, the reader is “the judge, the policing power in charge of verifying the *authenticity* of the signature and the signer’s behavior” (de Man 33, emphasis original). With the power in the hands of the reader, it is not surprising in many ways that there is such a large debate around truth in memoir. Without the theoretical background, readers believe that there could only be one truth, instead of the many truths that are created by having multiple witnesses. The idea of only one truth, a truth that can be verified makes memoir different from other forms of writing. Contemporary readers believe that the words “memoir,” or especially “autobiography,” on the cover of a book or on a bookshelf proclaims that the experiences in the work are “true,” when we, the audience, has not yet defined what truth actually is. The audience expects something from the author which they believe has been the law from the beginning. There is no way to completely define what truth is and what it means, making the entire truth contract nonexistent. It is impossible to hold McCarthy to this idea of truth when we, the audience, do not even know what it is.

Readers however are invested in the idea of truth as it relates to memoir in a way that they are not as invested in any other sort of genre. What the audience does not realize is that truth is as subjective as humor or horror, because it is based on a personal moral

imperative (Maftai 25). The conventional audience does not see all of the ways that their perception of the memoir can be different from the author's and does not realize that while they may not find it ideal in the beginning, the idea that a text can be as relational or not, as true or not, is freeing for both the reader and the author. The author is allowed to write their experiences as they experienced them, not relying on how well they think their work will be received or not. The reader is also able to have their own personal relationship with the text which comes from the experiences the author has written on the page, not the experiences of the author the reader has not experienced. As much as the audience would like to have the full story of everything, it is not completely possible, nor should the author be expected to do so. Fallout over exposed lies in autobiography is "a public [outrage] at feeling tricked or deceived rather than outraged that the sacredness of truth had been threatened" (Maftai 53). This public described by Maftai is not concerned, as we might think they should be, with the idea of truth and what truth means, but with the idea that they had been intentionally deceived. If Timothy Dow Adams is to be believed, those who "trick" the reader are doing so in service to the narrative, not for any nefarious reasons. However, if the memoirist presents their work as being the absolute truth and it is not, it represents a violation of the autobiographical pact. This is a violation because they misrepresented their position as an author. McCarthy avoids this type of outrage because she continuously defines herself as a liar and shows many, many times how what she wrote in *Memories* deviated from what may have actually happened.

McCarthy may have been unable to tell the truth due to her position as a woman, or due to her family history, but her lies were supported by outside sources, as much as

she was questioned about the validity of her story. What McCarthy did is she accepted her life-long position as a liar and storyteller so that the audience, from the very beginning, knows that what they are reading may be fiction. This approach is different from the approach of Lillian Hellman, who does not include the same disclaimer as McCarthy and does not portray herself as a liar. Hellman then is expected to follow narrative truth and is criticized openly and often by the academy for not telling the truth. The audience can trust McCarthy when she says that she lies and that her lies are important. McCarthy's readers do care whether McCarthy is lying, but since they know she is lying, they can accept it. This type of acceptance, never witnessed in a court of law or in an argument between parents and children, shows that lying within memoir is acceptable, as long as the memoirist who is lying admits to their lies. This shows that the audience is not concerned with the state of truth within the literary world, but only the state of truth within that one memoir. McCarthy admits to her lies, and no matter the reasons behind them, her confession makes her lies into narrative truths.

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