Spring June 2nd, 2015

Isolation of the Individual in the Novels of Carson McCullers

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A project submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements of the University Scholars Program

Seattle Pacific University

2015

Approved_____

Date_____

Abstract

A southern novelist of the mid twentieth century, Carson McCullers is often labeled as a Southern Gothic author, and her novels reflect the violence, grotesque characters, and dilapidated settings of the genre. However, while early interpretations of her work focused on the depravity of doomed characters, more recent analysis has opened up her work to a productive understanding of social change. Her characters are isolated from the rest of society, whether by race, religion, or sexuality, but rather than highlighting their own shortcomings, these isolating factors underscore a limitation within the social structures and the need for change. This essay examines McCullers' three novels that have received the widest critical attention: *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and *The Member of the Wedding*. The themes of race, sexuality, economics, gender, and religion are explored for the moments in which characters overcome their isolation, and through their interactions with one another, a positive change can be glimpsed. This examination attempts to bring McCullers work into a broader social relevance.

I. Introduction

Although the few novels she wrote in her life are heartbreaking, dark, and violent, Carson McCullers continues to challenge pessimistic literary interpretation. Her characters experience racial inequality, deep poverty, sexual repression, heartbreak, loneliness, and unnatural, cruel violence. Yet they also experience the happiness of each other's company, the joy of music, the satisfaction of sex, and the wild thrill of youth. McCullers also challenges her own labels and categories, leaving no theme unexplored, however controversial, and crafting intricate plots alongside scenes that expand on a momentary feeling. Most challenging of all, her characters are never stuck in their own versions of the grotesque, and their isolation isn't permanent. In their brief moments of interaction, new possibilities open in McCullers' world, the world of a highly structured South. Thus, despite the tragic endings of each of her novels, a positive change often lingers just beyond the final pages.

Carson McCullers was a southern author, writing primarily during the 1940's and '50's. Major cultural themes of the South that made their way into the literature of the time included a nostalgia for the past and the regional traditions: the powerful family unit, the "belle femme" of womanhood, the social role of marriage, and the leisure class of the plantation owners. Economically, as Frederick Hoffman notes, the South was still recovering from the Depression, though urban areas were beginning to see a revival in manufacturing. However, rural communities, which had become desolate after the Civil War and declined further during the Depression, never recovered, creating a tension between social classes based on employment. These "warped rural communities and small towns" become the setting for McCullers' novels, based on her own experience growing up in Georgia (Boyd 314).

While nostalgic for the past, southern literature also embraces the uncertainty of twentieth-century culture: the shifting political landscape, the swiftly changing scientific and technological developments, and the relationship between individual and social identity. According to Lewis Simpson, characters in novels of this time often found meaning, or lack thereof, in their own self-actualization, instead of national and social concerns. But arguably the largest impact on literature was World War II, and McCullers' work is no exception. Her novels attempt to reconcile the self with a fragmented worldview, cope with a sense of disillusionment with life, and form a "suspicion towards the supernatural," questioning universal meaning, including religion (Boyd 315). Mary Snodgrass also points out that McCullers was largely influenced by her Baptist background, and although she stopped attending church after leaving home, her work continues to question the Church's role in society.

Understanding this setting is crucial to an examination of McCullers work, as it illuminates the tensions between characters. Inherent in the South were strict social structures, so a theme of isolation is inevitable in McCullers' novels. But tensions between individuals open up the possibility for change, especially in a society in the midst of rapid change itself.

II. The Southern Gothic

Within this cultural context, Carson McCullers is often labeled as a Southern Gothic author, along the lines of Flannery O'Conner, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty. Molly Boyd defines the Southern Gothic as "a mode of fiction utilized by critically acclaimed modernist writers of the Southern Renascence, characterized by grotesque characters and scenes, explorations of abnormal psychological states, dark humor, violence, and a sense of alienation or

futility" (311). Furthermore, the Southern Gothic utilizes the cultural myths of southern society, such as the defeated plantation aristocracy, religious fundamentalism, racism, and desolate towns. The Southern Gothic label is a fitting one. In her novels, Carson McCullers features a mill town lacking work, the cruel beating of a horse, the attempted rape of a minor, a racially spurred street fight, a circus freak show, and numerous characters who are unable to communicate with one another: a deaf mute, a drunk who cannot put together two coherent sentences, a young girl lacking the words to express her sexuality, an atheist doctor surrounded by Baptists who want to pray for him. McCullers' work is dark, violent, and full of alienation.

However, the term *Southern Gothic* was originally a derogatory one, connoting "barbaric" or uncivilized literature (Boyd 312). It also suggests an obsession with the individual psyche that harkens back to the Gothic of the nineteenth century, and many early critics read McCullers work within this context. Irving Malin argues that the "New American Gothic is close to Poe and far removed from Howells," implying that this "new" Gothic is a reiteration of dark romanticism, with characters pushed to their psychological extremes and unable to change, rather than characters formed by their own actions, as in the Realism movement from the turn of the century (5). Furthermore, he finds that the New American Gothic "believes that the psyche is more important than society" and "is primarily concerned with love" (5). These views strip the Southern Gothic of its social relevance and place in the literary trajectory into the modern era. At a time when the Romantic views of universal good and evil were outdated and writers were concerned with the nuances of a rapidly changing society, Malin finds McCullers to be too stuck in the past, too obsessed with the internal.

More than anyone, Leslie Fiedler provided a determinedly pessimistic view of this literature. Writing much of his critical work in the 1950's and 60's, immediately after McCullers' novels were published along with the rest of the Southern Gothic movement, and while Freud's theories of sexuality and the unconscious were rampant, Fiedler created a landscape of literary criticism focused on the individual, the psychological, and the tragic. He viewed American literature as a product of "a psychic revolution," noting Freud's theory of the id, ego, and superego and that conflict within a novel was "the prey of conflicting psyches" (xxvii-xxviii). Within this context, Fiedler's main argument about American novels as a whole is "the failure of the American fictionist to deal with adult heterosexual love and his consequent obsession with death, incest and innocent homosexuality" (xi). Like Malin, Fiedler denies any social relevance beyond the self in this fiction, and his interpretation precludes the possibility for change.

Specifically in regards to modern literature following "The Triumph of Realism" in the twentieth century, citing even McCullers' contemporaries "William Faulkner or Eudora Welty," Fiedler finds this fiction to be "bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a gothic fiction, nonrealistic and negative, sadistic and melodramatic—a literature of darkness and the grotesque" (xxiv). Referencing Carson McCullers alongside Truman Capote and Edgar Allan Poe, Fiedler argues that "images of alienation, flight, and abysmal fear possess [American] fiction" because "the death of love left a vacuum at the affective heart of the American novel into which there rushed the love of death" (126-7). Here again, Fiedler harkens back to the nineteenth-century Gothic with a negative connotation. Rather than progressive literature advocating for social change, "the American gothic [. . .] identified evil with the id and was therefore conservative at its deepest

level of implication," which is to say "natural human corruption" (148). Gothic fiction, of Poe and McCullers alike, is doomed to despair by Leslie Fiedler, and the individual characters, who feel isolated and alienated in their settings, have no chance at social relevance.

These initial delimiting interpretations of the Southern Gothic have survived in contemporary criticism, so even positive analyses of McCullers' novels reduce them to internal explorations of love, sexuality, isolation, and death. Jan Whitt and Louis D. Rubin both identify Carson McCullers as an extension of the dark romantic Gothic, opposed to modern Realism. Molly Boyd finds McCullers' characters to be victims "to the cultural malaise of modern alienation" (316). Lewis Simpson sees them as "lost individuals" finding meaning only within themselves (2). The characters isolated from the societies in their stories remain similarly isolated in critical analysis, and thereby they remain isolated from the reader and the broader social context. Nothing is to be gained by reading the texts besides a deeper understanding of one's own human nature.

III. A Genre of Social Subversion

While these interpretations of the Southern Gothic undoubtedly lead to useful insights and a powerful exploration of the human psyche, critics are beginning to question the limits of this approach. Sarah Gleeson-White, notes that focusing on the grotesque and the violent forms "a *negative,* unproductive view of the world and human activity" (1). Rather, she advocates viewing the Southern Gothic as a genre of social subversion, in which the alienation of individuals is caused not by character defects, but by the limits of the social structures themselves. The characters who do not fit into society are the ones on the cusp of change.

Isolation, or what Gleeson-White calls "subjectivity," is caused by "both compulsive conformity and willful transgression," but this isolation is "neither fixed nor transcendent; rather, it is a subjectivity in process, 'becoming,'" (2). That's to say, an individual is isolated because they have taken a step beyond the norms of society, but they have not yet fully realized their new identity. For Gleeson-White, McCullers' novels and the genre of Southern Gothic give the reader characters who, through their isolation, underscore the possibility and the need for change. In particular, she focuses on "errant gender and sexuality" as the major theme of McCullers' work (1). However, she does not believe these characters are psychologically deviant. Rather, their nonconformity is a search for new identity, within a society that does not yet recognize or even have a word to describe their feelings.

In order to make this interpretation, Gleeson-White employs Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque to describe the role that the grotesque plays in the Southern Gothic. In the carnivalesque, "the laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life are suspended" (Bakhtin 122). Social customs—and the traditional worldview—are put on hold to allow something new to happen, to allow change to occur. Like a carnival itself, the carnivalesque embraces the weird, the strange, the abnormal, the grotesque, and it is common ground for all people and characters, whether rich or poor, black or white, child or adult. Bakhtin, commenting on the Russian Realists and, in particular, Dostoevsky, argues that the carnivalesque appears in novels as a way to instigate conflict, or action, and also as a means for resolving it. The carnival becomes "the place for working out, in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a new mode of interrelationship between individuals, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of

noncarnival life" (123). These scenes imagine a world in which the traditional social structures are broken down. Then the characters can imagine new possibilities and try them out. Even though the carnival is temporary, characters have a new understanding of themselves and their place in society when balance is regained. The worldview has necessarily changed.

It's no coincidence that Carson McCullers references carnivals in almost all of her novels, often as a launching point to question a particular social norm or highlight a character's form of grotesque. Beyond such scenes, Gleeson-White says the entire span of McCullers' novels embraces the carnivalesque mode: "the tensions and difficulties inherent in the grotesque are exactly what enable a liberating reading of McCullers' novels, for tension precludes any possibility of stasis" (4). Through the grotesque, the Southern Gothic mode opens up a world in which characters can imagine new possibilities. These are not the white, upper-class, Baptist, family-centric characters who define traditional southern society and literature of the time. These are characters who subvert the status quo by not fitting in, and in doing so, they present a different worldview that must be reconciled with the existing one. The ugly side of the grotesque, the violence and despair, is necessary, for only "a violent contradiction" can open up "the possibility for new worlds" (5). Rather than delimiting, hopeless, or pessimistic, the Southern Gothic uses the temporary darkness to look forward to something new. Thus, the grotesque illuminates "the affirming and productive moments—and there are many—in McCullers's account of what it is to be human" (6).

Other critics similarly focus on other positive aspects of the McCullers' work, such as the prevalence of human agency. Mary Snodgrass argues that characters' actions are more powerful in McCullers' novels than natural or supernatural forces, such as a Gothic interpretation might

claim, so she considers McCullers "to be a Realist" (206). Melissa Free views her novels as forms of social protest, giving voice to the voiceless, and argues that McCullers uses "the grotesque as an objection to abjection and silence." David Punter describes the Southern Gothic as nonconformist literature, on the "boundaries of the civilized" with "relative morals" (312). He cites McCullers most famous work *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* as a social protest novel where deviance, particularly psychological deviance, is the norm, and he views the purpose of her novels as a critique of the failures of society.

Patricia Yaeger focuses on "the transformative power of the grotesque" and, much like Gleeson-White, sees McCullers' novels as a process of becoming for the characters who are dealing with the pressures of their social context (Yaeger 150). Rather than viewing the Southern Gothic as a form of psychological exploration, these critics see the genre as a form of Gothic Regionalism, speaking to its place and time, and Carson McCullers uses each of her character's isolation, alienation, and nonconformity to suggest their process of changing into a more positive, self-accepted identity.

Beyond individual change, Southern Gothic breaks through the isolation of the grotesque to envision a new social identity. The very fact that these characters are different, even considered barbaric, is proof that the social structures no longer work: they are unstable. Each character's nonconforming attributes are manifested in the Gothic, whether it's the selfish drunkenness of a man who laments inequality, the blue glass eye of a black woman trying to survive among white privilege, or an outburst of animal cruelty in response to one man's own bodily shame. But rather than negative flaws, the grotesque elements underscore what has been missing from literature and its cultural context. When viewed together, as a subverted society,

those excluded from the status quo offer an alternate identity. Thus, Carson McCullers' novels and the Southern Gothic genre advocate for broader social inclusion and a deeper understanding of what it means to be human, by sharing a glimpse, however brief, of inevitable change.

In order to see this new social identity, an examination of character interactions is necessary. No isolated character is truly isolated, for the Gothic opens up space for these characters to find common ground. Sometimes these interactions lead to positive developments. Most of the time, they end where they started, in separation, or worse, in a violent backlash. Either way, the possibility for change remains faintly open in each of these characters, a possibility which can be seen more visibly when compounded across scenes, novels, and themes. Therefore, this essay will focus on McCullers' three most critically acclaimed novels, which best exemplify Southern Gothic societies on the cusp of inevitable change: an economically depressed mill town in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, a military camp during peacetime in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and a starkly segregated city in *The Member of the Wedding*. Though each character embodies the grotesque in a distinct and dynamic way, the themes of racial, sexual, economic, gender, and religious isolation occur most often in McCullers' novels and will be the launching point for a reexamination of the Southern Gothic through a socially relevant lens.

IV. Race

A clear and vivid example of alienation in any southern novel, including those of McCullers, is race. Well into the twentieth century, racial segregation was a powerful issue in the Deep South, and while it is at the forefront of isolation in her novels, McCullers also presents the

reader with many characters who challenge the status quo of white and black relationships. Race is the perfect place to begin an exploration of identity through interactions.

In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers gives a voice to the black community through the Copeland family, at the head of which is Dr. Benedict Copeland, an educated doctor, a level-headed rationalist, and an idealistic black nationalist. He believes in "the real true purpose" to cast off "the yoke of submission and slothfulness" and be "a teacher for the Negro race" (70). To him, the advancement of the black race is completely opposed to "the quiet insolence of the white race" (73). Copeland refuses to speak to most white characters in the novel, is disappointed that his daughter works for a white family, and harbors deep resentment against predominately white institutions, including the church, businesses, and the courts. This preference forces Copeland to seclude himself, and when he is not making house calls, he sits at home alone. Symbolically, he is often found alone in the dark, telling others "the dark suits me," a play on both his racial identification and his self-isolation (62). Snodgrass considers Copeland "too idealistic" and "a wasted martyr to the cause of human relations" (202). Instead of participating within the broader community to seek change, Copeland's isolation causes him to lose his relevance.

This internal seclusion manifests itself externally. He is crippled by his own sickness, likely pneumonia, which leaves him bedridden for days. In a further extension of the grotesque, Copeland has a violent temper that he struggles to suppress and a history of hitting his former wife, a violence aimed at what he perceives to be the apathy and laziness of other black people. He is grotesque not only in the eyes of the traditional white society, but also in the eyes of his own people as well. For this violence, Malin finds him manipulative, taking "equality to the

point of abstraction" (17). He would do anything for his ideology, but he ignores the real people that it affects, including his own children. By putting himself before society, Copeland is betraying his own people.

However, Copeland does break beyond his own self and, for a moment, finds common ground in an unlikely place. Jake Blount is a working class drifter who comes to town looking for any work he can get his hands on, ending up at a circus, and through his exposure to labor unions, Blount becomes convinced of communism, which he calls "the truth" and even "the Gospel" (*Heart* 57). Communism is to Blount as Black Nationalism is to Copeland. However, Blount's views are too radical for him to communicate with others—"when a person *knows* and can't make the others understand, what does he do?"—so he resorts to drinking heavily (60). His drunkenness only makes him more inarticulate, more difficult to understand.

But when Blount and Copeland come together, they find that their radical ideologies share a common understanding, and for the first time in the novel, a society of racial equality and integration is imagined. Though the first few times that they run into each other, they are both distrusting, Copeland does recognize "a strange, fixed, and withdrawn look of madness" in Blount's face, the same withdrawn madness that Copeland feels in his anger towards black apathy (127). Each of their versions of the grotesque open up a common ground between them. This culminates in a scene after a tragedy involving one of Copeland's sons, in which Blount visits the house to pay his respects. Copeland is alone in his bedroom, too sick to converse with the rest of his family. Blount is too drunk to leave or control what he says. These Gothic, alienating elements of their characters force them to collide in the doctor's bedroom, resulting in "a feeling tense as conspiracy or as the deadly quiet before an explosion" (253). But it is not an

explosion of despair or tragedy: it's an explosion of ideas. Blount finally has an audience who is educated enough to understand his lecture on communism. More importantly, Copeland speaks openly with a white character for the first time about racial oppression. It's also the first time that he has been understood, and though Blount prefers to view oppression from an economic perspective, when Copeland argues that "it is impossible to see the full situation without including us Negroes," Blount agrees, "that's the system" (256-7). The two characters discuss equality and justice, both believing that "the struggle of [black] people for their human rights" is the most important next step to break the status quo (259). They are united by a common goal and are individuals no longer. They are partners in the formation of a new society.

Furthermore, they are united by their shared humanity. "A quick, swollen rush of love" comes between them, and the two men clasp hands (259). Copeland, normally calm and collected, is agitated, excited, and ready for real action. Blount, normally rough and mean, becomes tender. In a novel of racial segregation, both geographically and verbally in the way characters dominate scenes, the embrace between Blount and Copeland is a sign of the potential for something new. It's no coincidence that McCullers wrote and set the novel in the 1940's, pre-Civil Rights Movement but nonetheless on the cusp of inevitable change to racial relations in the South.

Unfortunately, the Southern Gothic is weighted by the structures of a society that demands conformity, and the momentary bond between Copeland and Blount cannot last. After they have accepted their common purpose, the two men turn to the problem of taking action, and here the pressures of reality prove too great to overcome. Copeland wants to stage a demonstration, but Blount knows that no one will pay attention. Blount wants to educate the

public, but Copeland knows it would be too difficult to explain. Additionally, their individual needs come back into the equation. Blount wants to fix the system causing oppression at its core level, and urges Copeland to "see the forest through the trees" (261). Copeland's focus is first and foremost on black rights, by whatever means: "the cotton must be picked before the cloth is made" (261). Their differences devolve again into contempt for one another, with Copeland calling Blount "crackpot," a "blasphemer," and a "fiend" (261-2). Copeland creates a divide between them, isolating himself internally, as the sickness overtakes him externally in a fit of coughing.

Nevertheless, the novel offers a glimpse of future racial equality and a suggestion for how it may be achieved. More importantly, though these characters cannot overcome their Gothic isolation, their new insights do still linger. As the sickness continues to take Copeland's health, he "could not clearly recall those issues which were the cause of their dispute," and wanting for someone to talk with, he begins to accept the company of his family (284). Symbolically, the family member who Copeland despises the most, his religious father-in-law, is the one from whom he accepts a ride at the end of the novel. They discuss justice during the ride, and though their ideas of justice are starkly different, they both agree in the need for "justice for us Negroes" (287). As an individual, Copeland is resigned to pessimism: "there was no one to hear him" (287). But McCullers does not leave the reader with futility. The father-in-law both literally and symbolically picks up the reins to get both he and Copeland moving, remarking "us got a long way to go" (287). The struggle for justice is far from over. McCullers simply gave the reader—and Copeland—a glimpse of how it could begin.

V. Sexuality

In contrast to racial isolation, which is easily evident in southern fiction in segregation, isolation based on sexuality is much more convoluted. Nevertheless, a wide range of sexual expressions, feelings, and ideologies find their way into McCullers' novels. Lacking cultural language for sexuality, whether it be 'gay' or 'straight' or an understanding of youthful exploration, McCullers relies upon impulses and urges within her characters to imagine what a society free from sexual oppression might look like.

In *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie, who goes by F. Jasmine, is on the cusp of adolescence at twelve years old. Previously, she "had never believed in love," something "she had never talked about in all her life," and her view about sex was as nothing but "nasty lies" (531, 470). However, that summer brings an awakening within her. First, she realizes her desire for intimacy: "what she had wanted so many nights that summer [. . .] somebody sleeping in the bed with her" (472). She also experiments sexually for the first time with a boy in his family's garage, "a secret and unknown sin" (482). She does not yet understand her feelings, but when another man expresses interest in her, she does recognize "something strange" (524).

However, her sexual awakening is a process of becoming, a process of which she is still very much in the middle, in the awkward phase—in the grotesque. She no longer associates with either the younger or the older children, not fitting in with either crowd, and her internal feelings have not yet manifested in an external sexuality. Her hair is "cut like a boy's," and "she was grown so tall that she was almost a big freak" (462). This identification with freakdom continues throughout the novel, as she visits a Freak House at the circus, and "it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we

know you" (477). Frankie tries to embrace her sexuality by altering her appearance, trying to make herself conventionally attractive, but to no avail. She wears too much perfume; her dress is always unkempt; and her face is always covered in dirt and smudges. Malin points to these futile changes as clear indicators that her sexual exploration is an attempt to make up for her distant father. Snodgrass sees Frankie's "masculine nickname" as a "rejection" of her female sexuality (200). Changing her name to F. Jasmine is an attempt to assimilate by rejecting herself—her sexual exploration is not her own and causes her despair. Her self-isolation from the other children in town, as well as her new internal desires, cause Frankie to feel like she is all alone, and she resorts to wandering the streets of town, having conversations with strangers who do not reciprocate.

But it is only through other characters that Frankie's understanding of sexuality begins to change. She spends the majority of this summer with two other people. One is Bernice, her family's cook, an older black woman, deeply religious, and the voice of social norms in the novel. The other is John Henry, Frankie's six-year-old cousin and the voice of innocence, often questioning why things are the way they are. They spend the summer discussing all manner of topics around the kitchen table, from God to the circus to music. Bernice enjoys talking about her past loves, which Frankie usually ignores, but in one particular scene, Bernice begins to talk about a different kind of love, about socially nonconforming sexuality. During this conversation, Frankie "did not stop up both her ears" (531).

Bernice lists the deviant behaviors she has seen, including "boys to take it into their heads to fall in love with other boys" (531). She tells of a local boy names Lily Mae Jenkins, who "prisses around with a pink satin blouse and one arm akimbo" and "fell in love with a man name

Juney Jones. A man, mind you" (532). Already Bernice's depiction of Lily Mae, whether accurate or not, conflates the boy's sexuality with his gender, and the notion of homosexuality is far outside her vocabulary. She goes on to explain that "he changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl [. . .] to all intents and purposes" (532). Although Lily Mae's name is feminine, McCullers gives no contextual reason, either in this scene or any of her novels, to assume that she is implicitly alluding to transgenderism. Whether Lily Mae is expressing himself, or he is a girl, or Bernice is making the whole story up, is irrelevant, for she is labeling the boy as grotesque, deviant, Gothic. In this passage, Frankie is focused on his sexuality—especially the fact that it is not considered socially acceptable by Bernice.

In fact, these norms are so ingrained in Bernice's worldview that it is easier for her to believe a man became a woman to love a man, rather than believe that two men would be attracted to each other. She resolves the perceived inconsistency—a man loving a man—with a surface level answer, a forced assimilation into social norms, instead of a deeper understanding of sexuality. Frankie is skeptical, asking "did he really?" but she knows that, in a similar way, she is expected to have "a nice little white boy beau" (*Member* 532-3). But within her identification with freakdom, Frankie sees herself as an 'other' just as much as Bernice labels Lily Mae as an 'other.' Gleeson-White views Frankie's internal conflict as "an alternative model to female identity," and "her identification of self with freakdom is a social practice, not an inherent condition" (13, 20). That's to say, Frankie's transition into adulthood and her sexual exploration, though deviant from social norms, are in the process of showing society and the reader a new form of identity. Her sexuality is part of her adolescence. Just as she is growing into it, her new experiences question the status quo of female sexuality.

It's exactly this remaining nonconformity that underlines the limits of Bernice's, and society's, views on sexuality, and John Henry doesn't miss the flaw in her argument: "'How?' John Henry suddenly asked. 'How did that boy change into a girl?'" (*Member* 533). John Henry may not understand the weight of his question, but his innocence questions the status quo, asking the questions that the reader would be asking. The question itself is important, pointing out an instability in the social structures, because the question has no answer. Bernice can only respond "I don't know" and "it's just one of them things" (533). Unsatisfied, John Henry continues to ask why throughout the story, with the same lack of answer. A better understanding of sexuality is inevitable, and though neither Bernice nor Frankie will find it in the course of the novel, John Henry's questions are evidence that society is in the process of changing.

A deeper understanding of sexuality lingers in Frankie as well. Unfortunately, as a Southern Gothic novel, this understanding is revealed through violence, and in this case, an attempted rape. Frankie allows a soldier to take her to his hotel room, acting out her role as a romantically interested adult female, which she believes is expected of her. But when he attempts to make a move on her, she "realized the reason for her uneasiness," equating the scene with her previous sexual encounter in the garage (583). The important change in Frankie is that she understands that she is in control of her own sexuality, but "these separate recollections" only unite "as shafting searchlights meet in the night sky" after she witnesses the marriage of her brother to his wife (598). Only then does she realize the dichotomy between society's expectation for her love life—and that she has not assimilated to it. Most importantly, when the circus comes back to town, she does "not enter the Freak Pavilion," not for the sake of alienation, but because her self-identity has moved in a more positive direction (604).

At ease with her adolescence, Frankie interacts with children her own age again. In order to get to this place of a productive social identity, Frankie needed to interact with other grotesque characters—whether they be grotesque in violence like the soldier or grotesque in nonconformity like the Freaks, John Henry, and Lily Mae Jenkins. By seeing these radically different ideas of sexuality, Frankie's world opens up to a much more dynamic definition of her own feelings and those around her, and she has the potential to continue positive sexual interactions in the future.

VI. Economics

A defining trait of the Gothic is the economic impoverishment of a defeated social class. In the traditional Southern Gothic, the defeated group was the plantation aristocracy, no longer wealthy in the Postbellum. For Carson McCullers, it's the urban tradesman, no longer making a living off the land after modernization, but no longer able to find work in town after the Depression. Not only does economic hardship cause a collective malaise, but it leads to a strain between individuals as well. In a society where value is determined by the ability to work, one cannot participate without an income, and in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers' characters often measure their relationship to one another based on their economic contribution, with those on the lower end cast aside in grotesque isolation.

The Kelly family has hit hard times after an injury left Mr. Kelly unable to do carpentry work. They resort to renting out the rooms of their house to boarders; the older children take odd jobs; and Mr. Kelly fixes watches and clocks for the town jeweler. Their economic situation shapes their family dynamics: "it was money, money, money all the time" (*Heart* 264). In fact, the only daily communication that the parents have with their children is about money. Mrs.

Kelly manages the income from the boarders, and she only stops to speak to her daughter Mick, a protagonist of the novel, to relay information about what they can afford for dinner.

Mr. Kelly is especially affected by their economic situation. Unable to work, besides the occasional watch repair job, he resents his role in the family and constantly laments over "ways he could have made money and didn't" (41). This causes him so much pessimism that "he didn't go out to look for other jobs any more," and instead, he keeps himself "busy around the house" (265). As a bleak subversion of his traditional role as the breadwinner for the family, Mr. Kelly attempts to contribute in inconsequential ways—oiling doors more often than needed, inventing different ways to do the same things, even taking over some of the chores of their family servant Portia—and he lies about the amount of work to be done. Rather than face the truth, he voluntarily keeps himself busy because "none of the kids went to him for anything and because he didn't earn much money he felt like he was cut off from the family" (86). The Gothic context of economic impoverishment causes individual alienation.

His daughter Mick, just fourteen years old and the middle child of the family, is similarly isolated. Since her parents are otherwise engaged and her older siblings have jobs, Mick is tasked with looking after her two younger brothers. In essence, she is robbed of her own adolescence in order to contribute to the family, but ironically, since she does not bring money into the household, she is nonetheless an outcast. She is despised by her older sisters passively, as if she was an object taking up space in their lives, and Mick is equally resentful that she is dependent on them: "it's my room just as much as it is either one of yours [. . .] I don't want to wear your old hand-me-downs" (36-7). The only member of her family she has ever connected with is her older brother Bill, but even he does not pay her attention anymore, now that he has a steady job

working as a mechanic. He spends his time "hunched over the desk, reading *Popular Mechanics*" (37). When she tries to spend time with him, he is too busy for her; he does not "begin tussling with her hair like he used to" and sits "with his back to her" (37). Like her father, Mick turns inward and had to be "doing something every minute" to keep herself occupied (262).

Not surprisingly, Mick's relationship with her father centers around money. Mr. Kelly feels the need to "give her any nickel or dime just because he was lonesome and wanted to talk" (85). Mick is conditioned to value their monetary relationship: "she only halfway wanted to take the dime, but when he held it out her hand was just naturally open and ready" (85). From her father, Mick learns that her value is tied to the economic contribution she can make to the family, and even though her preference is to "work hard at music," she also feels a sort of "panic" on the edge of adulthood, knowing her love of music does not have immediate monetary value (270). She is soon presented with the opportunity to sacrifice her music, and the remainder of her childhood, for a job to make up for her father's lack of work.

On one hand, many critics view this as the Gothic attempt to destroy the family, for "if the family cannot offer security, nothing can" (Malin 50). Mick becomes a breadwinner because the family has failed, and in a 'barbaric' system, each member must fend for themselves. In a more positive, but equally individualistic interpretation, Molly Boyd views Mick's independence as an example of "the indomitable human spirit" in the face of a broken culture (316). Mick is the ideal protagonist of Realism, actively pursuing her own path. However, both of these interpretations continue to define Mick's worth by her economic value, whereas Mick's changing interactions with others suggest that her self-worth moves beyond a monetary identity.

When she is first presented with the idea of working a job at the ten-cent store, she secretly does not want it, and the responsibility makes her feel nervous. What makes her decide to accept is not the money itself, but the way her family was "all talking about her—and in a kindly way," including her sisters (271). Mick becomes included in their society, and "of a sudden she loved all of the family and a tightness came in her throat" (271). The family is concerned for her, allowing her to move beyond her isolation and form a connection with them. More importantly, a broader identity within the family is found. When discussing whether or not she should take the job, the other family members mention not only her earning potential, but also the value of her education and her time to be at home and grow up as a kid. Mick sees the opportunity for the family beyond the basic needs of their social class as well, thinking about "installments on a radio" and "a piano" (272). The family forms a new identity of their economic status, an identity which includes room for value beyond money.

The bliss does not last, for in an epitome of the Gothic notion of forces beyond one's control, Mick realizes that "the job wouldn't be just for the summer—but for a long time, as long a time as she could see ahead. Once they were used to the money coming in it would be impossible to do without again [. . .] it was like she had been trapped into something" (273). The cultural reality of an economically depressed region do ultimately overtake Mick. Her value once again is tied to her ability to contribute. However, her alternate, subversive self-worth remains in her.

She feels more confident around the local café owner, Biff Brannon, whom she used to avoid because she had stolen gum from him. Little did she know at the time, Biff is a generous man who often opens tabs for customers who cannot pay, but her own feelings of inadequacy

kept her from seeing this side of him. But now, she is a frequent diner at his café, and "he always wanted to talk to her" (301). Even though she can barely save up enough to keep her clothes in good condition, she still manages to pay installments on a radio and hums music in her head while working. Most importantly, she retains her will to fantasize about the piano and places value in herself by the potential to someday make her own music: "else what the hell good had it all been [. . .] it had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too" (302). She desperately clings to her subversive self, and although the reader may find this attempt heartbreaking and futile, Mick does not lose her identity. Gleeson-White argues that in "these small concluding moments," Mick will "continue to emerge beyond the ending of [her] narrative" (37). The tension between Mick's subversive side and her social assimilation still exists, which means stability has not yet been achieved. Her individual identity is still in the process of becoming. Furthermore, Biff Brannon, who had always been drawn towards Mick, still sees value in her beyond a shop girl with a run in her stockings, so the potential for a new social identity remains as well.

Not able to contribute to her family, Mick feels like an outcast, for her worth is tied to her economic value. However, once she understands that her interactions with other characters do not depend on money—her family's concern for her whether or not she works, her conversations with Biff at the café—exclusion based on economics fades away. Instead, the characters interact inclusively, beyond monetary worth. The family bonds together to support their expenses, and Biff serves all the patrons at his café, regardless of their ability to pay.

VII. Gender

Whereas *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding* wander through desolate towns over stretches of time, allowing their characters explicit isolation, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* is a much more compact novel. But it is exactly this closeness that allows McCullers to reveal a Southern Gothic subversion of one of the most implicit forms of isolation: gender roles. The novel takes place on a military base at peacetime and centers around two pairs of married couples in the officer ranks. The military setting reinforces the idea of hierarchy, control, and domination, traits which a reader would expect to appear within marriage dynamics of a traditional southern novel. However, the novel subverts masculine and feminine roles between husband and wife.

Captain Penderton is the highest ranking officer on the base, but his demeanor is passive and unauthoritative. He often feels like "a small man" and describes himself as "a coward" (*Reflections* 313, 315). In part, this is due to the fact that Penderton is a repressed homosexual, with "a sad penchant for becoming enamored of his wife's lovers," and to be sure, his sexuality plays a large role in his self-isolation and inadequacy, in relation to his wife (314). However, Penderton's true social conflict in the novel is a struggle for control, for power, which manifests itself in a grotesque subversion of his masculinity. His character is depicted as "a delicate balance between the male and female elements, with the susceptibilities of both the sexes, and the active powers of neither" (314). Malin argues that gender is so "violated" in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* that Penderton "becomes nonliving" (25). His identity is lost with his gender, and he becomes nothing more than a "compulsive routine" of grotesque desires (25). His identification is bound up in his lack of control, and as such, his shame keeps him away from others. He does

not speak to the soldiers beyond the simplest of commands, and his conversations with his wife are curt at best.

At worst, their interactions devolve into a violent display of the grotesque. Leonora Penderton is a self-confident woman, who "feared neither man, beast, nor the devil" (*Reflections* 318). In her relationship with her husband, she is the dominant figure, but as this subverts his masculinity, it leads to a struggle for control. Thus, even a simple argument over shoes is blown out of proportion. Leonora confidently walks around the house barefoot before guests are about to arrive, refusing to listen to her husband's request for her to put on shoes. He becomes "intensely irritated" over this small detail, and in an attempt to belittle her and claim his own dominant position, he lashes out at her: "You look like a slattern [. . .] You disgust me" (316). Leonora retaliates with complete defiance, by undressing completely and standing naked in the front of the house. Not only does her undressing subvert the modesty of the traditional belle femme of the South, but her nudity, exposing the female body, is an overt expression of her femininity. Furthermore, her body is described as powerful, "magnificent," and "disciplined by sport," and therefore this strong femininity is "a slap in the face" to Penderton and his comparatively weak masculinity (317). Both far outside their own expectations, they resolve the scene with violence—in this case verbally. Penderton swears he will kill Leonora, and she threatens to drag him out into the street and thrash him. Underneath the unhappy marriage, this scene gives the reader a man and a woman whose gender roles are so inconsistent with the social norm that they become grotesque. Leonora is a strong, self-confident woman who is pushing against her expectations as a gentle wife. Penderton is a softer, more delicate man who feels the

pressure to be in control and is scared that he is not. Their inconsistencies are so strong that an argument over shoes becomes a battle of violence and domination.

As foils to the Pendertons, the Langdons exhibit more traditional gender roles, but even these become grotesque, indicating an instability in the social structure. Alison Langdon is physically weak, a "small, dark, fragile woman [. . .] not only was this illness physical, but she had been tortured to the bone by grief and anxiety" (319). Meanwhile, her husband Morris embodies the typical version of masculinity. He had "great heavy shoulders," is a "fine horseman," and "among both officers and men he was very popular" (323, 319). However, Alison tries to resist her submissive position as much as Leonora—constantly making plans to leave Morris and start a business of her own—but unlike Leonora, Alison's illness does not allow her to escape her social position, "overcome by a terrible helplessness" (329). Instead, she resorts to a symbolic defiance through violence, when she "cut off the tender nipples of her breasts with the garden shears" (327). This act is more than a descent into depression or madness. Cutting her nipples implies a reaction against her womanhood. Unlike Leonora, who shows her naked womanhood in defiance of subjugation, Leonora's helplessness drives her to shame and self-harm. Yet in the same way that the Pendertons' interactions lead to violence, so too do the Langdons' interactions.

Although they spend their evenings together, and occasionally sleep together, they are each isolated, unable to communicate what they are actually feeling. At dinner, "there was almost no table-talk" (319). During their evenings in the living room, they sit far apart, usually with their own activities. Neither Captain Penderton nor Alison "was comfortable at all"; Morris "was not altogether the same easy-go-lucky man"; and Leonora "felt the general depression"

(327). Ultimately, these characters are unhappy, as they try to force themselves into roles that are contrary to their true dispositions.

McCullers states this theme explicitly through the eyes of Morris Langdon in reference to his houseboy. Anacleto is the effeminate Filipino servant to the Langdons, and he admires Alison, as a friend and role model. Furthermore, he hates Morris—a hatred which is reciprocated equally. Morris finds Anacleto annoying and untrustworthy, but more importantly, he is baffled by Anacleto's complete rejection of masculine gender roles. He complains to Penderton that "it always seemed to me terrible for a grown man twenty-three years old to be dancing around to music and messing with water-colors. In the army they would have run him ragged and he would have been miserable, but even that seems to me better than the other" (384). Anacleto's behavior is so inconsistent with Morris's expectations of gender roles and understanding of how society functions that he would prefer a forced assimilation, at the expense of an individual threatening the status quo. Or, in Penderton's words as he struggles with the paradox of Langdon's worldview, "it is better, because it is morally honorable, for the square peg to keep scraping around the round hole rather than discover and use the unorthodox square" (384). Captain Penderton, himself a square peg in a round-hole world, contradicts Langdon—"I don't agree"—but this departure from the social norm leaves him feeling "distorted" and "grotesque" (384). Once again, the grotesque is a becoming, a change in process. Penderton realizes that the concept of traditional gender roles cannot hold, but he cannot see yet what will take its place.

But the novel does give the reader a glimpse of this new social identity. This time, though, the interaction takes on a function entirely different from her other novels. With such a claustrophobic setting in *Reflections*, Captain Penderton overcomes his isolation, not through

conversation or camaraderie, as he is already stifled by the presence of his wife, friends, and other soldiers. Rather, he overcomes it in a brief yet powerful moment of radical re-identification in the quiet presence of another. The scene occurs as Penderton takes his wife's horse Firebird out for a ride. Struggling between his lack of control with the animal and his own sense of despair, he lets himself go, submitting himself to his carnal impulses alongside the horse and seeing the world positively, "conscious of the pure keen air and he felt the marvel of his own tense body" (354). Penderton identifies with the horse. Thus when the horse grows weak, Penderton feels shame at his own weakness, beats the horse savagely, and collapses in despair.

A young soldier, who has been the object of Penderton's affection, appears. The comparison with the horse continues. Private Williams is described as animal-like throughout the novel, with "the eyes of animals" and the "agility of a wild creature," and here too "his slim body glistened in the late sun," much like the horse's sweat (309, 356). Furthermore, Williams is naked. From a sexual perspective, Penderton is awakened, but the scene invokes gender as well. Williams' nudity recalls Leonora's naked scene at the beginning of the novel, which also played with the metaphor of a beaten animal, and Penderton is again thrust into the submissive position. He is laying on the ground when Williams arrives, and Williams literally steps over his superior officer to attend the horse, though "lightly" (356). In this moment, Penderton assumes a new role, both as an officer and, metaphorically, as a man. He also comes to recognize a different form of masculinity in Private Williams. Before, he had only seen Williams as strong, dumb, and a brute, but in this moment, he focuses on the "slim and delicately built" bare foot of the soldier (356). He also sees the tenderness of Williams in the "caressing gesture" he uses with the horse,

a tenderness in stark contrast to the whip that Penderton used to control (356). This is Penderton's first exposure to a more delicate masculinity, in both behavior and appearance.

Penderton does not fight against his submission. He allows this younger, gentler soldier to take control of the situation, and additionally, he gives deference to his wife's horse, a deference that can be extended to Leonora herself. Most importantly in this scene is the way Williams treats Penderton, neither with repulsion or pity. It is best described as apathetic acceptance. After dealing with the horse, he walks away "without a glance at the Captain" (356). He finds no inconsistency in their roles but accepts Penderton's behavior for what it is and moves on. While this may not seem like a positive testament at first glance, in a novel filled with violent reaction and tension between characters, this scene becomes the most gentle of them all.

Both men are fully naked, one literally, one emotionally, and through this vulnerable interaction, they allow each other to redefine their roles. Penderton finds that, not only is he accepting of a submissive masculine role, but even a strong man can be tender and gentle. Oliver Evans points out that while McCullers' understanding of gender is heavily Freudian—namely in the manifestation of repressed impulses—her configuration is altogether new, and undefined. Gleeson-White argues that the constant emphasis on clothes, as well as the removal of clothes, emphasizes "that gender is something to be put on" (23). For Gleeson-White, the characters in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* are less representations of nonconforming gender roles, and more the possibilities of expression beyond gender itself, producing "new modes of relationship" (51).

In the forest scene, Penderton's lack of control does not bother him, and he takes a new, submissive position, while simultaneously affirming his masculinity. Similarly, Penderton's interaction with Anacleto and Major Langdon open up a new imagining of the function of

masculinity. He sees different versions of what it means to be a man, and though these new thoughts distress him, he nonetheless begins to understand that social norms can change.

VIII. Religion

Since McCullers' experience with religion was influenced heavily by her fundamentalist, Baptist background, religion plays a salvation-specific role in her novels. In other words, there exists already a social force of exclusion in her concept of structured religion, separating the righteous from the sinful. Lewis Simpson describes this as a "suspicion towards the supernatural," precisely because the Southern Gothic is instilled with a religious background and will turn wherever it can to find "hope for salvation." Molly Boyd argues that "religious fundamentalism" responds to an increasingly scientific, rational, and atheistic worldview, and fundamentalism creates rigid social structures, including religion, in which "the fictional individual's needs are often sacrificed to larger societal concerns" (311-13). Thus, religious society must exclude the sinful, including the grotesque, nonconforming members that do not fit the rigid ideal. However, in McCullers' novels, religion is portrayed alongside superstition and antiquated social beliefs, in which her isolated characters choose not to participate. Instead, isolated characters imagine what a world would look like if religion were inclusive, beyond a dichotomy between the salvation of the righteous and the damnation of the sinful. McCullers' work searches for a deeper understanding of religious life in the interactions of her grotesque characters.

In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Portia is a deeply religious character, though her version of Christianity reflects an ordered society: "Us don't hold with all this rolling on the floor and

talking in tongues [. . .] In our church we sings and lets the preacher do the preaching" (43). Her religion requires assimilation as well, and her husband, who used to "get the spirit ever Sunday and shout and sanctify hisself," joins her church and learns to quiet down (44). However, these expectations cause others to reject religion. Mick, Copeland, and Blount alike all scoff at the other characters' beliefs in God and Christianity—yet their rejection comes from a place of exclusion. Mick knows her sexual fantasies are not consistent with religious fundamentalism: "What would Portia think if she really knew?" (45). Copeland's atheism creates tension within his own family, and his atheism only increases as they talk about white superiority in Heaven. The fact that they believe Jesus "will place His holy hand upon our heads and straightway us will be white as cotton," makes Copeland feel "isolated and angry and alone," for he refuses to participate in a social norm that limits his own sense of self (125). Blount tries to befriend Simms, the street preacher, for both share a passion for social justice and public demonstration. But Blount is turned away for "the sinful stink of beer" and "smoking cigarettes" and his "radical" communist ideas (240). While each of these versions of Christianity are distinct, they form a religious institution, built on social order and expectations, that drives the nonconforming characters away from participation.

But they are not completely excluded. Copeland, for example, sees a version of himself and his own black rights activism in the young Lancy Davis, and he is struck when Lancy writes, "I want to be like Moses, who led the children of Israel from the land of the oppressors" (*Heart* 156). Copeland becomes agitated. In this brief moment, he is presented with what he once thought impossible—that religion could, potentially, include a place for his own struggle for racial equality.

Similarly, in *The Member of the Wedding*, the characters question a religion that excludes them, and even Bernice, a deeply religious woman, is skeptical of how social justice and Christianity can coexist. As a black woman, she feels the isolation of race, but her solution goes beyond equality—Bernice subverts race altogether. She imagines a world where "all human beings would be light brown color with blue eyes and black hair" (546). This view implies that racism is more than a social construct. Rather, it is a natural consequence of the differences between humans, so it is only from a point of view of God, who created the difference, that Bernice can fix it. Similarly, she would rid the world of war and violence, with "no Jews murdered anywhere" (546). Set against the backdrop of World War II, the genocide of the Jewish population is another example of a people group isolated based on who they are. Interestingly, Bernice's care for the Jewish people indicates that she finds common ground with other excluded people. Thus, through Bernice, the passage suggests that religion alone does not cause isolation, but it can be used to separate people. In fact, Bernice also mentions a positive view of God, that God "made free air and free rain and free dirt for the benefit of all," so she believes that food should also be free and "no hunger in the world" (546). Essentially, Bernice's understanding of an ideal God is that all humans should have been made equal, but when she looks at the world around her, she finds that this is inconsistent. Her interactions with other Christian believers, as well as Jewish people, suggest to her that religion does not have to be an exclusive institution.

The ideal inclusive world of Bernice, alongside the inclusive worlds of Frankie and John Henry, is not solitary, only to fix her own grievance. Rather, their worlds build on each other. Frankie takes up Bernice's idea of equality and build upon it with equality for adolescents,

gender, and sexuality. Frankie agrees with equality, but she also includes choice. John Henry adds "his two cents' worth" by incorporating new possibilities and definitions, such as "half boy and half girl" identities, expanding Frankie's ideal of choice to an ideal of endless opportunity for change (547). Alone, they are disillusioned by a religious institution that excludes some. But together, "their voices crossed and the three world twisted," forming a picture of a new society (547).

Ultimately, the tradition of Christianity creates a social norm within their town. Bernice, often the voice of society, uses religious norms to advocate conformity. When Frankie asks Bernice if she will "grown into a Freak," Bernice responds, "Why, certainly not, I trust Jesus" (477). By singling out Jesus, not only does Bernice's remark take a particularly Protestant, evangelical tone, but she also hints that salvation is tied to conformity. When she tries to explain to Frankie why a marriage is between two people, she references the ark in Genesis, though reduces it to a common understanding: "He admitted them creatures two by two" (529). In both of these examples, Bernice's particular understanding of religion creates a social norm. As such, Bernice's hope for a world of inclusion is a hope for a new way that religion is used within society, whether or not she recognizes this claim herself.

Furthermore, equating religion with superstition in the novel underscores how it can be used to exclude based on social tradition. Bernice is an incredibly superstitious character, such as telling Frankie that marriage stops people from growing taller or that every man she has been with was symbolic of her first husband, so when she reasons with religion, it becomes convoluted with the supernatural. Ultimately, Bernice's wisdom from religion is just as untrustworthy as her wisdom from superstition. McCullers also includes a scene in which

Frankie converses with a fortune teller, who also invokes her view of religion. In reference to her son, the fortune teller describes him as "a boy God had not finished. The Creator had withdrawn His hand from him too soon [. . .] so that he was left eternally unsatisfied," implying that God determines individual fate just as much as her palm reading of Frankie or the astrological signs (575-6). The fortune teller's tricks are revealed as mirrors and gossip, and Frankie ultimately decides that she does not believe in fortunes but laments "how could you argue with a fortune-teller?" (577). This metaphor suggests that religion is a trick as well, but built upon a tradition that does not allow questioning.

However, McCullers is not wholly skeptical. When a Catholic character is discussed, Bernice is distrustful, "saying that Roman Catholics worshipped Graven Images and wanted the Pope to rule the world" (603). But here, at the end of the novel, Frankie has accepted a more inclusive worldview and considers Bernice's view to be "narrow-minded" (602-3). Importantly, Frankie's view of religion opens up only after she has been able to interact with another excluded character—a grotesque Roman Catholic. Thus, Carson McCullers does not necessarily fault God or Christianity for excluding people, but rather, she questions the way society interprets God for its own structures.

The fundamentalist religion of the 1940's South creates an entire culture of religious language and beliefs that exclude characters who cannot participate. Bernice tries, but even she recognizes its limitations, imagining a more inclusive vision through her personal interaction with Frankie and John Henry, as well as her social interaction with Jewish people. Copeland chooses to stay away from religion, yet he cannot help but see the possibility of a more inclusive institution, when he encounters Lancy Davis and the similarities between biblical and

contemporary oppression. Thus, McCullers implies that, just as economic and social structures can adapt to include nonconforming people, so can religious institutions.

IX. Conclusion

These five themes—race, sexuality, economics, gender roles, and religion—are only a handful of examples of the powerful social forces at play in Carson McCullers' novels, social forces that expect conformity in a dynamic world and thereby cast out individuals into isolation. McCullers gives voices to these grotesque, nonconforming characters, but her work transcends the delimiting boundaries of the Gothic. Rather, she shows the reader that, within its social context, the Southern Gothic is a genre of subversion, undermining unstable structures and pointing to change to come. Moreover, McCullers allows her isolated characters to interact, however briefly, and when they do, a striking image of a positive future occurs. Reexamining McCullers' work in this way opens up a new approach to the Southern Gothic genre. Beyond an exploration of limited individuals or a static, pessimistic picture of life at the time, this literature—from O'Connor, to Faulkner, to Welty—has the potential to offer something new, at a specific time and place in the midst of change. Within its historical context, the Southern Gothic becomes socially relevant by pointing to the change to come.

But the importance of Carson McCullers' novels is not limited to a social critique of the mid-twentieth century. The "emancipatory and empowering potential" of McCullers' subversive vision continues to challenge the contemporary reader (Gleeson-White 10). Her themes of sexual exploration and adolescent angst will always be part of human experience. The racial tension of McCullers' world is echoed today in major urban areas where segregation has once again

become an issue, and racial justice is a common discussion among politics, academics, and the media alike. While homosexuality has reached a point of general acceptance, transgender issues, which implicitly appear in McCullers' work, are now undergoing a similar debate. Her themes transcend the South as well, for similarities can be found in other regions of contemporary society, in their own forms of Gothic Regionalism. Areas of the Midwestern United States have recently faced economic collapse on level with the Great Depression and are in the process of recovering, while individuals redefine themselves in the face of job loss and poverty. Many states in and beyond the South continue to wrestle with the backlash of religious fundamentalism and what it means for the nonconforming individual. A new wave of feminism and the discussion of gender roles has reached cities with a large presence of the technology industry, such as San Francisco, Seattle, Raleigh, and Austin, where women are still greatly outnumbered by men in leadership roles. As Gleeson-White says, "it is her continuing yet often overlooked relevance that makes a reconsideration of her fiction so urgent" (10). If the novels of Carson McCullers are nothing more than psychological explorations of doomed characters in a failed society, then her work is an interesting snapshot of a time in literature, to be read for enjoyment once in a while. But if, as many modern critics believe, her work transcends the isolated individual and shows the possibility of a new, productive social identity, then an examination of McCullers' novels can provide relevant insights on the issues and solutions that contemporary society faces.

But there is more work to be done. Her other two novels, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and *Clock Without Hands*, as well as her short fiction, should be examined in relation to the three novels presented here, in order to form a full picture of the society McCullers attempted to

capture. Additionally, the characters are not isolated by one social pressure at a time, and the interplay between these themes should be examined. Frankie resists conforming due to both her adolescent change and her sexual awakening, different but not distinct from each other, a fact that Bernice fails to distinguish. Furthermore, while the characters and themes presented in this essay are easy to understand in hindsight, McCullers also challenges the reader with characters who continue to defy contemporary definitions. For example, Biff Brannon, the owner of the café in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, is a masculine man in his outwardly traits but gentle in spirit. He likes his long, bushy beard as much as he likes trying on his wife's clothes. He has affectionate instincts that can best be described as maternal, and though he feels shame about his impotence around his wife, he also has desires for both the young boys and girls in the novel that suggest something not quite innocent. Biff is just one such complex character who defies even contemporary understanding. Perhaps these characters are still isolated, underscoring an instability in current social structures yet to be resolved. Perhaps these characters will reveal to us a change still in progress and a glimpse, however brief, of a future still to come.

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XI. Faith and Learning Appendix

To be human, scholarship is a necessity. The cultivation of knowledge is an ever-closer contact with the reality and truth of the world, and if one takes seriously, as I do, that God is at the basis of reality, then scholarship is an approach towards God. Religious tradition is merely a starting point, while the arts and sciences challenge traditional ideas, bringing together opposing worldviews, the old and the new, to form a new synthesis and a deeper understanding of faith. When we pursue knowledge, whatever tiny sliver we each hold, we approach God, and only through the entire scholarly community, not just the Christian community, do we make contact with reality.

As an English major, my passion lies with literature, and I pursue scholarship as a way to both comprehend the particulars of the human condition and make broad connections within the world. I do not expect to renew the world with my honor's project, but I do firmly believe that my small sliver in the pursuit of knowledge will make contact with an ultimate reality and participate within the broader context of human scholarship.

My honor's project, in a sense, looks at a microcosm of this human participation. By examining the isolated characters in Carson McCullers' novels—and more importantly, their interactions—my hope is to convey how these individuals form a new societal perspective, a new identity, and perhaps a deeper understanding of reality.

As a genre of social subversion, Southern Gothic Fiction focuses on the isolated and outcast members of society, those who cannot identify with the established social norms. Christians are called to serve these isolated individuals and invite them into community, and I hope that a new understanding of the Southern Gothic genre will illuminate the possibility for

social identity in the midst of isolation. In section VIII of this essay, I point out that McCullers allows even Bernice, her most religious character, to question God and creation, for the faults she finds implies that society has misconstrued the truth. This passage underscores why I believe an exploration of literature is necessary, especially to the scholar of faith. It is only by questioning our worldview and imagining dynamic, new possibilities that we can truly grow in knowledge. As a Christian reader approaching McCullers' work, I attempt not to let my faith interpret her characters' isolation, but to let her characters' isolation interpret my faith and challenge me to a deeper understanding of creation.