

The Desiring Child: An Examination of Childhood Queerness
in the Fiction of Carson McCullers

by

Katie Angeline Yablecki

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of

The University of Manitoba

in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of English, Film and Theatre

University of Manitoba

Winnipeg

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Abstract:

The main purpose of this thesis is to present and highlight the radical potential in the work of Carson McCullers, primarily through an examination of her representation of young, queer individuals. This thesis argues that McCullers forces her readers to re-think the categories of “child” and “adult” through her creation of ambiguously gendered, sexual child characters.

Thanks and Acknowledgements:

To my friends, teachers and, most importantly, my family. I could not have finished this without all of your support—be it financial or emotional or by giving me candy.

I dedicate this thesis to my own bespectacled John Henry, who split this heart, this full moon heart.

Introduction:

“How do we see a sexual child as being something other than our own perversion?” asks Kathryn Bond Stockton in *The Queer Child; or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Bond Stockton 120). Bond Stockton is asking this question in her exploration of one of literary history’s most contested and troubling child characters—Vladimir Nabokov’s Dolores Haze in *Lolita*. Dolores— who is known by the narrator and protagonist, Humbert Humbert, as Lolita—has troubled readers and critics alike as her character seems to encompass so many things that, for most readers, exist as contradictory binaries. Lolita is a sexual child who is presented as having, at given times, agency over her sexuality, but Lolita is also vulnerable and at a disadvantage due to her circumstances as a child. But what really troubles readers is the fact that Lolita is so sexual and, according to the narrator, the first one to initiate intercourse with the middle-aged Humbert Humbert. How can we view Lolita as a sexual child, but also a victim? For many people in our society, a sexual child is a deviant child—we have trouble viewing children as sexual beings without thinking of it as being wrong, or being a sort of animalistic impulse. We do not afford children the same intellectual properties and capabilities as we imagine adults having and, therefore, view children as being not quite human. However, it is precisely this sort of thinking that makes children vulnerable. Humbert Humbert recognizes Lolita’s vulnerabilities—she is orphaned, due to him, and dependent upon him financially—and his desire and fetishization of all of her childish attributes stops him from recognizing her as a person with desires and needs of her own.

We can recognize Humbert Humbert as a pedophilic, manipulative man, yet there is something about his character that rings true for our society as a whole. Our society has been, and still is, heavily invested in our conception of “the child” and childhood itself.

In *The Case of Peter Pan, Or, The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* Jacqueline Rose points out that that “there does not seem to be a readily available language in which one can talk of childhood sexuality and insist on the reality of child sexual abuse at the same time...language itself is made innocent” (Rose xi). We view children as innocents, lacking both the mental and emotional capabilities that are associated with adult sexuality. But why do we struggle and refuse to acknowledge childhood sexuality? According to Rose, adults view children as being synonymous with innocence—to acknowledge that children are not one homogenous group, that they are individuals that cannot be classified or made to fit a certain set of stereotypes, would be a threat to the way that we view ourselves as adults. Rose claims “if we[adults] do not know what a child is, then it becomes impossible to invest in their sweet self-evidence, impossible to use the translucent clarity of childhood to deny the anxieties we have about our psychic, sexual and social being in the world” (xvii). This fits into Bond Stockton’s claim about our view of childhood as a “vertical movement upward (hence, “growing up”) toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness” (Stockton 4). We view children as being in a perpetual state of becoming and adults as the finished product. However, this sort of thinking is not only harmfully limiting to children, but to adults as well—it denies growth to adults, but it also forces certain heteronormative expectations onto children. It is rare to find honest depictions of childhood sexuality, even today, due to these anxieties that we have created around children and our inability to let certain

stereotypes about childhood go. This is what makes the child characters in Carson McCullers's work so important. McCullers challenges our concept of "the child" and allows them to have the same range of depth—emotionally, sexually—as her adult characters. This will be my primary concern throughout the following chapters of this thesis—to reveal how McCullers challenges our current concept of the child through her creation of a sexual, queer child and to also explore why McCullers's challenge is important.

Generally, the Southern Gothic, as a genre, is associated with "a gloomy vision of modernity, according to which the soul of man is both aimless and loveless. The grotesque worlds of Southern literature, it is argued, allegorize the human condition itself as existential alienation and angst" (Gleeson-White 107). In the past, the writing of Carson McCullers has been read as a one-dimensional portrayal of human suffering and not taken seriously for its social critiques of race, class and--most importantly-- gender and sexuality, despite the fact that the majority of her short stories and novels prevalently feature these social themes. Darren Millar explains that this trend is brought upon by McCullers's "oblique approach" to social issues as a possible reason for why many readers have viewed her work symbolically. Millar points out that "a survey of McCullers criticism in the decades following the publication of her final novel would indicate that she exposes unhappiness that is spiritually, not historically, derived; that her works are allegorical depictions of loneliness and longing belonging to everyone; that her interest in socially and politically marginalized characters serves primarily to illustrate a universally tragic human condition" (Millar 88). However, recent critiques, like Sarah Gleeson-White's *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*, have

begun to take McCullers's social critiques seriously and focus instead on the radical potential that can be found in McCullers's work.

Gleeson-White focuses primarily on how McCullers represents gender and sexuality in her work and argues that the grotesque aspects of McCullers's work "allows us not only to pinpoint but also to underscore and celebrate those radical—and overlooked—features of her [McCullers's] novels: resistance and disobedience, sexual and gender anomaly" (Gleeson-White 2). Gleeson-White positions McCullers's writing as being both relevant in current debates on gender and sexuality, but also "highlighting their limits and gaps" (2). Yet even Gleeson-White's work on McCullers contains a fairly large "gap" itself—namely, McCullers's dealings with childhood sexuality. This is not to say that Gleeson-White, and other critics before her, have not dealt with the childhood sexuality in McCullers's novels and short stories; what is lacking from these critiques is an exploration of how McCullers's young characters challenge and resist the conventional category of "the child". McCullers's child characters can be viewed as queer, sexual characters, which are two things that our society has trouble associating with children.

Before exploring McCullers's depiction of childhood queerness, it is important to clarify what exactly is meant by the term "queer". The word "queer" is often used as a sort of umbrella term to refer to anyone in the LGBT community. In general, a person who identifies as queer, or displays characteristics that can be described as queer, is acknowledging the sort of restrictive binary thinking that accompanies both a heterosexual and homosexual identity and rejecting one of those static sexual identities. Although a queer identity can often be taken on solely as a sexual identity, it can also

refer to how an individual, or individuals, view their life as whole in terms of their sexual behavior, desire and gender. A queer identity is an attempt to break away from viewing one's gender or sexuality with a binary mindset and acknowledging that both sexual identity and gender identity can be fluid things. It is important to note that McCullers herself was a queer individual who largely considered herself to be a sexual "invert" (Carr 59). A queer person rejects the heteronormative view of love and desire, which is to say that they reject the sort of traditional gender roles that exist both inside and outside a heterosexual relationship. Heteronormativity divides sexualities into hierarchal categories, where traditional heterosexuality is considered to be "right" and normal and anything that differs from that is viewed as wrong. During the time that McCullers was writing—and, unfortunately, even still today-- social institutions were dominated by heteronormative thinking. Heteronormativity separates people into hierarchal binaries and marginalizes anyone who differs from the stereotypes assigned to the categories that it creates.

McCullers also describes herself, and has been described by others, as being a "tomboy", which is another term that will show up throughout this thesis. In *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History*, Michelle Ann Abate states, "tomboys have been variously viewed as icons of feminist defiance, symbols of juvenile delinquency, and precursors of sexual deviance" (Abate vii). Abate traces the history of the tomboy through its various emergences in American history and what becomes predominantly clear throughout the extensive examples that she gives is how the term has evolved over time, making it hard to define—it is not a static term, but rather an "unstable and dynamic one, changing with the political, social and economic events of its historical era" (xii). Generally, a tomboy

is a female, usually a young female, who acts, by whatever standards society at a particular time has designated, like a boy. This “transgression” into boyish behavior obviously differs depending on the individual and can show up in a number of ways, from the way that this tomboyish girl dresses, wears her hair, uses language and/or carries herself. It can also be expressed through the sort of activities that the girl participates in or shows an interest in (xv). The characteristics exhibited by McCullers’s tomboyish characters may not necessarily define a girl with similar attributes nowadays as a tomboy. For instance, a girl smoking cigarettes in our present day would not be regarded as a tomboy based solely on the fact that she smokes. That being said, when McCullers was writing, smoking was viewed as a masculine habit and the fact that McCullers’s young female characters smoked played into their overall construction as tomboys. McCullers’s use of tomboyish characters plays into her overall deconstruction of gender and sexuality, especially in regards to childhood sexuality. McCullers obviously had a personal interest and investment in the deconstruction of gender, sexuality and childhood, as she herself admits in her autobiography *Illuminations and Night Glare*, where she states that her feelings on these matters had been with her since childhood.

Carson McCullers was born Lula Carson Smith in Columbus, Georgia in 1917. Her mother was a housewife named Vera Maguerite Waters and her father, Lamar Smith, was a jewelry store owner, much like Frankie’s father in *The Member of the Wedding*. McCullers graduated from Columbus High School at the age of sixteen and although she was not gifted academically, McCullers was a piano prodigy with dreams of becoming a concert pianist. However, McCullers, who would be struck with ill health throughout her lifetime, contracted rheumatic fever when she was a teen. The illness left her without the

physical stamina necessary for the demanding practice schedule required for her hoped for career as a pianist. The often sick and bed-ridden McCullers took comfort in books and was a voracious reader whose appetite for literature led her to consider an alternative career as a writer. McCullers's mother had high hopes for daughter as a concert pianist and so McCullers kept her desire to write a secret. In 1934, the then seventeen year old McCullers left Savannah, Georgia and moved to New York City under the guise of going to study piano at the Juilliard School of Music. In actuality, McCullers hoped to study creative writing and begin her career as a full-time writer. She took various part-time jobs, studied at Columbia University, as well as at Washington Square College of New York University. McCullers began work on a manuscript in 1936 called "The Mute" while she was sick with a respiratory infection—this manuscript would later be published in 1940 as *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

In 1937, McCullers married a fellow aspiring writer named James Reeves McCullers Jr.. This relationship would plague McCullers for the rest of her life, as the two both suffered through alcohol addiction together, sexual ambivalence and a strong sense of jealousy on Reeves's part over McCullers's later literary success. The couple married and divorced before America joined in the fight for World War II where Reeves fought in Europe—the couple corresponded throughout the war and re-married upon Reeves's return. McCullers herself admits in her autobiography that she found sex with her husband "boring" and had little interest in it, though she claims to have never been with another man (Dews 38). McCullers does not admit explicitly to having had affairs with other women, though the stories abound about her infatuation with the writer Katherine Anne Porter and a strange obsession with the heiress Annemarie Clarac-

Schwarzenbach, who had “a face I [McCullers] knew would haunt me to the end of my life” (22). There are also stories told by friends of Reeves and Carson McCullers of them chasing after the same man or woman, or Reeves disappearing with a man while Carson stayed and chased after Katherine Anne Porter at the writer’s commune Yaddo (Carr 137). The editor of McCullers’s autobiography, Carlos L. Dews, discusses the importance of the American composer David Diamond in Reeves’s and Carson’s life and how Diamond affected the latter’s work. Dews describes how “the trio seemed destined for a triangular relationship like those later depicted most clearly in Carson’s novels *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*” (Dews xx). Diamond was “originally attracted to Carson [but] soon developed a relationship with Reeves...awaiting his divorce from Carson, Reeves lived with Diamond in Rochester, New York for four months in 1941...the appearance to Carson of a successful relationship between Diamond and her soon-to-be-divorced husband only furthered her sense of betrayal and fear that she would be excluded” (xx). McCullers purposefully omits any mention of Diamond in her autobiography, which Dews believes is “particularly significant given the importance of untenable triangular relationships in many of McCullers’s works” (xx).

Both Reeves and Carson were heavy drinkers who often took their feelings of disappointment and envy out on each other violently. McCullers suspected the stress of her relationship with Reeves to be one of the primary causes for some the strokes she would suffer and eventually die from. While living in Paris in 1953, Reeves slunk further into a pit of depression and alcohol abuse and tried to convince Carson to commit suicide with him. Carson fled in fear that Reeves would murder both of them and he committed

suicide by himself shortly after that in November 1953. The last fifteen years of McCullers's life were dotted with various struggles, both emotionally and physically, as her health drastically declined and the strokes she suffered left her paralyzed and bed-ridden. In 1967, the year McCullers died, she dictated the majority of her autobiography to her secretary. She was left comatose for forty-seven days after her final stroke on August 15, 1967—she died early in the morning on September 29 in the Nyack Hospital in New York State. McCullers's poor health and turbulent lifestyle were both impediments on her work and her literary output is quite small in comparison to other prominent American authors. That being said, the work that McCullers did manage to produce has left a lasting impact on American literature. Her writing style is simple, accessible and entertaining on the surface, while also managing to be a social critique of the society that McCullers lived in. McCullers presents a challenge to the way we conceive sex, gender, race, class and age in a way that is still incredibly relevant today.

Carson McCullers once stated that “everything that happens in my fiction has happened to me, or it will happen eventually” (Carr 105). McCullers's queer romantic interests, penchant for dressing in men's clothes and ideas on human sexuality in general play a large role in her fictional work, especially when it comes to her young female characters. Three out of the four novels that Carson McCullers wrote feature an adolescent female character that can be best described as “queer”; these young females are tomboyish in their appearance and attitude and display a certain sort of reluctance to participate in conventional heterosexual relationships. What is most striking about McCullers's young queer characters is that McCullers presents them not so much as in a state of becoming either a queer adult, or questioning their own sexual feelings, but rather

having a sort of comfort in, and acceptance of, who they are and how they would like to be later on in their lives. Children are generally depicted in literature, films, and elsewhere as being incomplete, as if their still developing bodies render them as only partial human beings. The young queer characters in McCullers's work do not seem to be depicted as "not-yet gay" or "not-yet straight", just as they do not exist as "not-yet humans" either. What shapes and changes these characters' behavior has less to do with them "growing up"-- it is rather more a matter of them being violently thrust into a certain set of expectations that they cannot meet in their current state of being. These characters recognize their inability to conform to certain societal expectations that are mostly based on their gender and age. As a result of this awareness, these characters feel alienated and dream of escape and adventure in far-off places.

Like Gleeson-White, I will be making the argument that McCullers's work is more than just an existential portrayal of human loneliness. Instead, I will examine the sort of radical potential that can be found in her depiction of children and how her depiction children fits into a current critique of childhood sexuality—namely, childhood queerness and the very notion of "the child" itself. My first chapter will examine how the young female protagonist in Carson McCullers's short story "Like That" literally rejects the very notion of "growing up" and instead represents a figure that, according to Stockton, grows "sideways"(6). This short story was published posthumously in 1971 and describes, through the first-person narrative of a young queer girl, how the narrator's older sister transforms into a zombie like person through her relationship with a young man named Tuck. This short story represents the sort of heterosexual romance that is often romanticized in our culture as a limiting and damaging thing, as the narrator's older

sister ultimately loses all of her own hopes and desires and instead goes along with Tuck's plans and goals for his own life. The second chapter will look at another queer female adolescent in McCullers's first, and most well-known, novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is often read allegorically, but an allegorical reading of this novel diminishes the radical potential that the young queer protagonist, Mick, offers. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers incorporates the trope of the unfinished--which is associated with the majority of her young characters in her other novels and short stories-- in order to underwrite the subjective categories of age and gender. The final chapter will look at the two young queer characters in the novel *The Member of the Wedding*: the tomboyish protagonist, Frankie Addams, and her younger, cross-dressing cousin, John Henry. Frankie Addams is probably the character that has been written about the most in both recent and past critiques, but she is also one of McCullers's most complicated and slippery characters and, as a result, the other young queer character—John Henry—often gets left out of most literary discussions about this novel. I will instead show how these two young characters both play off of each other and into a larger discussion of childhood sexuality in two different forms.

My ultimate goal in this thesis is to illustrate the radical potential that can be found in McCullers's work. Despite her initial popularity in the middle of the twentieth century, Carson McCullers is not an author that is widely read or discussed anymore. Perhaps this has to do, in part, to her relatively small literary output. However, I believe that the formerly held attitude that the social critiques in McCullers's work were not to be taken seriously, but rather just part of an illustration of human suffering, may also have something to do with this. Yes, McCullers's main point of interest in her work is human

loneliness and feelings of alienation, but it is precisely through this point of interest that McCullers explores and challenges certain social issues. McCullers attempted to give an honest portrayal of how she viewed life in her work and, as a queer female, this often meant challenging gender and sexual norms in her writing. McCullers, who grew up in a small, poverty stricken Southern American town, also challenges race and class, as she witnessed first-hand how destructive the stereotypes associated with those categories could be for certain individuals as well. McCullers does not objectify her characters in order to make a point about a certain social issue, but rather she highlights certain qualities that make her characters from all different sorts of circumstances similar—mostly through their feelings of alienation and loneliness—in order to challenge certain negative stereotypes. Through her characters’ acts of rebellion—whether it be towards their gender, sexuality, race or class—McCullers’s characters represent other ways of being and challenge the categories that many people in our society, even today, still hold to be true. McCullers celebrates difference in her work in a way that is neither objectifying nor limiting.

Chapter One:

Representations of Alternative Ways to Grow in Carson McCullers's "Like That"

Despite the fact that Carson McCullers's first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, was an incredible success, McCullers still struggled with her career and getting her work published after *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter's* publication in 1940. McCullers seemed to have more of an issue getting her shorter pieces of prose published and, subsequently, had many of the short stories that she wrote later on in the 1940s rejected by numerous magazines and literary publications. After McCullers's death in 1967, a collection of her short stories, poetry, and essays were published by Houghton Mifflin in 1971 under the title *The Mortgaged Heart*, which is also the name of a poem written by McCullers in 1948. The work featured in this collection contains different, unedited versions of some of McCullers's work, but the majority of the pieces featured in this collection were rejected short stories that had never been published at all. The editor of *The Mortgaged Heart*, Margarita G. Smith, includes rejection letters from different literary agents and publications, illuminating both the struggles that McCullers dealt with in her writing career and the process that her writing had to undergo in order to get published. One of the previously unpublished short stories in this collection, entitled "Like That", deals with many of the same themes that McCullers tackles in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *The Member of the Wedding*, and, to a certain extent, *Clock Without Hands*. The quality of McCullers's writing in this short piece of prose is as strong as it is in her first two novels, yet there is a stronger tone of gender rebellion that leaves one wondering if this is why none of the literary publications agreed to carry it.

As in the majority of McCullers's novels, "Like That" focuses on a young, tomboyish girl at the peak of adolescence and the inner and outer alienation she feels as a direct result of her gender-bending, "hard boiled" personality (McCullers 73). However, McCullers chose to have her young tomboy protagonist as the main voice of the story, as the story is told through her first-person perspective. This makes the "Like That" quite different from all of McCullers's published novels and other short stories, as it is the only piece of prose that features a first-person narrative. McCullers has always been able to provide nuanced, somewhat empathetic descriptions of her characters in her other pieces of prose, yet there is something much more personal and vulnerable about having a story told through a first-person perspective. The story relies on the author's ability to create a sincere and convincing voice for the narrator and, when the narrator happens to be a controversial, somewhat queer young girl, the story itself becomes rebellious in nature.

Unlike McCullers's other young queer characters in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*, the narrator does not express or display any sort of sexual desire, though she does admit that her chosen lifestyle sometimes makes her feel "lonesome" (McCullers 73), and so her existence as a queer character is largely represented through her perspective. A lot of people use or associate the term "queer" to denote homosexuality, despite the fact that it is actually a sort of umbrella term used to describe a person who does not identify as heterosexual or with having a fixed gendered identity. Although the narrator does not discuss her sexuality or any sort of sexual desire in the story, her existence as a queer individual is still important and radical because it highlights the fluidity of having a gendered identity and calls into the question the sort of binary thinking that accompanies any gendered identity.

“You see I’d never be like Sis is now. I wouldn’t. Anybody could know that if they knew me. I just wouldn’t, that’s all. I don’t want to grow up—if it’s like that” (77). This is how Carson McCullers ends her short story “Like That”—with her thirteen year old female narrator assertively rejecting the notion of having to someday grow up and conform to her assigned gender role as a woman. The narrator obviously cannot halt the physical growth of her body, which in certain respects would grow upwards, so what exactly does she mean when she says “I don’t want to grow up—if it’s like that” (77)? In *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* Kathryn Bond Stockton describes the image of “the child” existing as an idea—not a person-- in a state of becoming “figured as vertical movement upward (hence, “growing up”) toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness” (Stockton 4). McCullers’s narrator seems to be rejecting this sort of growth—the vertical movement that coincides with the growth of the female body and the expectations that go along with the developing female body.

The thirteen year old narrator realizes, by observing her older sister, that the notion of “growing up” goes beyond the physical growth of her body; that the more her body grows and goes through the changes brought on by puberty, the more expectations there are that are gender specific. At the time that the narrator tells the story of her older sister, she exists in this sort of liminal state between being viewed as a child and being viewed as a young woman. Yet, despite the fact that the narrator is in fact quite young and, in many regards, naïve about adulthood and sexuality, she is still able to recognize that adult women in her American community (somewhere in the deep South) lack a sense of agency within their lives, much like children do. What the narrator also seems to

recognize is that the sort of agency that she witnesses her sister lose within her relationship to her boyfriend Tuck is perhaps even more constraining than the lack of power that the narrator feels in her position as a child. Therefore, the narrator's assertion that she will "never be like that" is in fact an attempt to gain some agency in her life; it is also the narrator's refusal to conform and take on the sort of gender role that society designates for women. The narrator's refusal to conform to her gendered identity is, even today, a fairly controversial one, but it is especially controversial when one considers the historical context of when McCullers was writing the story.

In describing a scene from the 1944 film *National Velvet*, Michelle Anne Abate traces the somewhat positive attitude towards tomboyism during the time of the Second World War to the antebellum era "recalling the antebellum origins of tomboyism as a preparatory stage for marriage and motherhood—along with societal fears about lesbianism—one of the primary reasons that tomboyish cinematic figures abandoned their iconoclastic ways was the affections of a man" (Abate 151). McCullers, who wrote this short story in the early 1940s, has her young female narrator literally reject this popular storyline of the tomboy as a sort of passing phase into femininity and heteronormative love. Instead, McCullers creates a young tomboy as the central voice of this short story who witnesses, in a sense, this sort of personality changing romance by watching her older sister as she goes through it. The difference is, however, that in "growing up" into a woman and abandoning the sort of childish ways that bonded Sis to the young narrator, Sis instead becomes a lonely and deeply unhappy seeming character. In this way, McCullers represents Sis's passing from her tomboy phase into womanhood as not just a loss of her childhood, but also a loss of her personality as a whole.

The narrator describes Sis as being a shadow of her former self, with no interests anymore of her own, losing all of her former ambitions and only going out of the house when Tuck visits on holiday weekends. The narrator describes Sis as passing her days “sitting by the window reading or writing to Tuck or just looking out” (McCullers 73). Sis even seems to physically embody the loss of her own personhood as the narrator notes how she becomes “thinner” and her face takes on the expressions “a grown person” (73). Sis’s new personality deeply affects and upsets the narrator, as Sis’s adult relationship with Tuck causes her to “just sit around or go for long walks in the chilly late afternoon by herself...sometimes she’ll smile in a way that really gripes—like I was such a kid and all” (73). Although we, the readers, are limited by the narrator’s first-person perspective in this story and thus never know for certain what occurred between Tuck and Sis that summer to make her “grow up” so suddenly, we can infer, based on the narrator’s details, that it was most likely sexual in nature and something that made Sis feel irrevocably bound to Tuck.

The narrator may be somewhat naïve when it comes to sexual matters, but she can still recognize that whatever it is that has occurred between Sis and Tuck has transformed Sis from being a fun-loving individual, with individual hopes and desires, into a woman constrained by her affections for a man. Sis’s world now revolves around the absent Tuck and the narrator seems to realize that not only is Sis’s physical being limited by Tuck when he is away—her staying indoors, doing sedentary, solitary activities—but her happiness is also now contingent on her affections for this man. It is this sort of binding, heteronormative relationship that the narrator feels repulsed and frightened by and, for her, this sort of affection is intertwined with growing up into womanhood. Sis’s

relationship with Tuck exemplifies the sort of “vertical movement” into “full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness” that Bond describes in *Queer Child*. Even though Sis hasn’t married Tuck yet, it seems like this is the expected course of action for them. McCullers’s presentation of heteronormative love is often negative, highlighting its limits to both women and men, which is certainly the case for Sis in her relationship to Tuck.

McCullers may be presenting Sis as a sort of tragic example of how old fashion gender roles negatively impact women, yet Sis’s behavior and relationship with Tuck would have been both common and expected, especially in the Southern American states during the mid-twentieth century. McCullers, having grown up in Columbus, Georgia, but later moving to New York just before the outbreak of the Second World War, would have experienced the attitudes towards tomboyish type behavior from two different viewpoints: the antebellum mindset from her childhood in Georgia that viewed gender-bending appearance and activities as acceptable in pre-pubescence and the resurgence of this attitude during the Second World War, when women were being urged to take over jobs and community roles that were formerly a primarily masculine domain. However, as Abate notes, “this code of conduct[during World War II] was necessary during this time of national crisis, but it would not be a permanent identity” (Abate 150). The attitude towards tomboyism during World War II was viewed as acceptable to both young and older girls, but, just like the older antebellum attitudes, was viewed as only being temporarily acceptable.

To further emphasize the temporality of tomboyism, a mass amount of books and films were released during the war that stressed the “prevailing beliefs in the situational

nature of tomboyism and the accompanying importance of taming” (150). McCullers would have obviously been aware and constantly exposed, in both her childhood in the South and adulthood in the Northern states, to the prevailing attitudes towards the tomboy and this notion of “taming”. Unlike the fictional characters in some of the films released around WW II, such as *National Velvet*(1944) or *Woman of the Year*(1942), McCullers in her own life also rejected this notion of the tomboy existing—and being socially accepted—as a phase in some girls’ lives. McCullers continued to embody, both physically and mentally, aspects of the tomboy that girls were expected to grow out of soon after puberty. It seems as if the young narrator’s rejection to never “be like that” was a direct reflection of McCullers’s own rejection of stereotypical femininity in her personal life.

The narrator in “Like That” can be viewed as a character of rebellion, refusing to ever let herself to be tamed by her affections for a man. In *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*, Sarah Gleeson-White describes “McCullers’s young girls” as “revolutionary; they figure as sites of resistance since it is the adolescent, representing the new generation, the future as hope and possibility, in which society so greatly invests” (Gleeson-White 12). Despite the negative depiction of Sis’s transition into adulthood, the narrator’s final statement of rebellion transforms the entire tone of the narrative into a story of “hope and possibility”. It seems as if McCullers wrote this short story with all of those girls and women who were being prompted to temporarily shed their gender roles in mind as an alternative route for them to take. If, like this young narrator, some girls and women find that they like doing certain things or dressing in a way that society at large deems as “masculine”, then why shouldn’t they? Instead,

McCullers's appears to be offering the possibility of a different sort of growth—a “sideways” growth, to borrow Stockton's term.

The narrator in “Like That” equates her adolescence with the freedom to do what she wants and be who she wants to be. Although feelings and ideas change as we grow older, especially through puberty, the young narrator in this short story appears to have a strong and determined sense of self. She is thirteen and on the verge of being a teenager, which is a time of rampant hormonal changes and sexual attraction, yet she cannot imagine ever abandoning her sense of self in the way that she feels Sis has, which she expresses by stating that, “I wouldn't like any boy in the world as much as she[Sis] does Tuck. I'd never let any boy or anything make me act like she does...I'm not going to waste my time” (McCullers 73). In fact, heteronormative romantic love makes the narrator incredibly uncomfortable, which she makes clear when she says “when one afternoon the kids all got quiet in the gym basement and then started telling certain things—about being married and all—I got up quick so I wouldn't hear and went up and played basketball...some of the kids said they were going to start wearing lipstick and stockings I said I wouldn't for a hundred dollars” (73). But it isn't just the thought of traditional romantic pairings that makes the narrator uncomfortable; she also displays a particular abhorrence to the natural changes that girls' bodies undergo through puberty.

The narrator describes a scene between herself and Sis when Sis was thirteen and had just begun to menstruate. The narrator prefaces the description of this scene by stating that “always the things I've learned new and didn't like have made me mad—mad clean through and scared” and then goes on to say, “Sis started with what every big girl has each month...I felt different toward Sis, too, and was so mad I wanted to pitch into

people and hit” (70). The narrator’s mother explains what is happening to Sis and what she will have to wear, which in that time would have been a much larger and bulkier version of the sanitary napkins that are now on the market today. The narrator expresses her confusion through aggression and bullying behaviour: “I was sitting on the bed, biting hard at my knee. ‘It shows,’ I said, ‘it does too!’[...] she had on a sweater a blue pleated skirt and she was so skinny all over that it did show a little. ‘Anybody can tell. Right off the bat. Just to look at you anybody can tell...it looks terrible. I wouldn’t ever ever be like that. It shows and everything” (71). The narrator claims that learning about new things that she doesn’t like provokes a sense of anger in her, but she does not explain why she does not like what, as she says, “every big girl has each month”, nor does she try to explain why she subjects Sis to her anger. This leaves one wondering what exactly it is about menstruation that upsets the narrator so much.

When contemplating the narrator’s negative reaction to learning about menstruation during Sis’s menarche, I was instantly reminded of Simone de Beauvoir’s quote about how “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (Beauvoir 173). Although Beauvoir is not referring to the physical female body in the above quote, her words can be literally represented in this scene between Sis and the narrator. Menarche is viewed in many different cultures—our culture especially—as the marking point for when a girl becomes a woman. As the narrator looks at Sis’s reflection in the mirror, the visible bulge of Sis’s sanitary napkin acts as a representation of the transition that Sis is undergoing. The narrator appears to be acutely aware of how sex manifests itself into gender in various forms of dress and behaviour, but it seems that the narrator also realizes that these manifestations of gender are not just arbitrary, but also decisions that certain

people make. What seems to truly upset the narrator then is the realization that there are certain physical differences between men and women that are inescapable and, especially for young girls, uncomfortable. The narrator can choose whether or not she wants to wear lipstick or “priss up flirty with boys” (McCullers 64), but she cannot stop her sex from physically manifesting itself as a woman. However, this scene between Sis and the narrator occurs several years before the major plot of the short story and it seems that the narrator’s refusal to ever “be like that” is not a refusal of her sex, but rather a refusal to identify with the female gender.

McCullers has often described her early years in New York City being spent reading everything and anything, from Karl Marx to D. H. Lawrence, and she would have obviously been familiar with Simone de Beauvoir’s writing and ideas (Dews xix). That being said, it could be argued that McCullers is not just representing the sentiment expressed in the Beauvoir quote about the acquired female gender, but expanding on that idea by offering up a character that has refused to submit to the gender binary of male/female. These are ideas that weren’t explored by feminists until years after McCullers’s death, most notably by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*. Butler claims that “if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. The presumption of a binary gender system implicitly retains the belief in a mimetic relation of gender to sex whereby gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it. When the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and

feminine a male body as easily as a female one” (Butler 9). What then becomes especially interesting about Butler’s statements in relation to the scene between the narrator and Sis is that, as the narrator makes caustic remarks about Sis’s belted sanitary napkin, they are both looking at Sis in a full-length mirror. The narrator is, in essence, witnessing as Sis’s reflection reveals her sex in a new way, as the napkin forms a bulge beneath Sis’s skirt.

It is interesting that McCullers sets this mirror scene up in this way, as it opens up the possibility that both Sis and the narrator could be interpreting Sis’s reflection in potentially different ways. McCullers has made the deliberate choice of having both characters looking into the mirror and drawing conclusions based on Sis’s mirrored reflection, instead of having the narrator look directly at Sis. Because we are limited by the narrator’s first person perspective, we have no way of knowing what Sis feels when she sees her reflection. The narrator draws a comparison to the way that Sis looked when she came home from, what the reader is led to believe, having her first sexual encounter with Tuck to how she looked in the mirror scene between the narrator and Sis. The narrator recalls Sis’s face as being “white like Sis’s there on the pillow[when she returned from Tuck’s]and with the circles under her eyes and the glinty hair to her shoulders” (71). Although the narrator never makes a direct connection between these two events, aside from noticing similarities in Sis’s appearance, McCullers clearly has her narrator paralleling these two memories with a deliberate intention in mind. Again, we have no way of knowing what Sis is really feeling in these moments and can only draw our conclusions from the narrator’s descriptions and identifications. The narrator seems to believe that Sis, on both of these occasions, is upset to the point of exhaustion, as she is

described as being paler than usual, with dark circles beneath her eyes (68 and 71). We share in the narrator's assumption that Sis's feelings of distress in these two situations have resulted from her menarche and her first sexual experience. These are two things that have been largely romanticized in our culture, yet McCullers gives us a character that appears to be traumatized by both of these events. That being said, we have no way of knowing if what the narrator recognizes as Sis being upset is in fact an accurate observation, nor are we given any real insight into what exactly Sis is upset by or about.

In exploring the already mentioned quote of Beauvoir's, Butler draws out the implication, made by Beauvoir, that "one becomes a woman, but always under a cultural compulsion to become one" (11). Clearly this "cultural compulsion" to become a woman would have been quite prevalent both inside the plot of this short story, as well as outside of the story, as the bulk of McCullers's writing was done before, during and just after WWII. But if gender is something that is completely dependent upon cultural compulsions, why does it not affect everyone? Why is the narrator seemingly immune to this cultural compulsion? Butler, however, does not view the formation of gender as being solely determined by sex or culture and it seems that Sis and the narrator exemplify Butler's refusal to define gender as a fixed and pre-determined thing. Both the narrator and Sis have grown up in the same culture and are, according to the story, of the same anatomical sex; yet, as Sis's romantic relationship to Tuck progresses, she adopts and adapts to the stereotypes of the female gender. In contrast to this, the narrator recognizes something different in herself and knows that not only will she never have feelings for a boy/man the way that Sis does, but she also does not want to feel those feelings and take on the gendered role that her sister and mother have. For Butler, the ideas fixed to the

terms “feminine” and “masculine” and, to a great extent, “male” and “female”, exist inside of the heterosexual matrix. This is why the narrator in “Like That” can be described as being queer, as she refuses to be defined by her sexual anatomy and also has absolutely no interest in someday having a heteronormative relationship, thus bringing her outside of the heterosexual matrix.

Although the narrator in “Like That” adamantly asserts that she knows that she’d “never let anything change me[her] at all—no matter what it is” (McCullers 73), this does not mean that McCullers is portraying her narrator as having a fixed identity. It seems more likely that this is just meant to play into McCullers’s portrayal of this young girl as having traits that do not comply with the stereotypes associated with the female gender—her refusal to behave in a stereotypically feminine way makes her identity more fluid, not fixed. The young female narrator is strong-willed, stubborn, independent, insensitive at times and “hard-boiled” (73), which are all characteristics that are usually attributed to males. This portrayal, along with the narrator’s acknowledged refusal to take on the female gender role, illustrates an alternative way of viewing both gender and the notion of “growing up”. Although McCullers does not have her narrator explicitly state things like “gender is a performance” or even admit to having stereotypical masculine traits, the depiction of her narrator and the narrator’s interpretation of the heterosexual relationship between Sis and Tuck exemplifies both the ideas expressed about gender by Butler in *Gender Trouble*, as well as the sort of vertical growth described by Bond-Stockton *The Queer Child*. What makes McCullers’s young narrator especially interesting is that, typically, queer identity is something that is attributed to adults and older teenagers. For a child to display characteristics that are not normally ascribed to their sexed gender is

something that has previously not been viewed as representing the fluidity of gender and sexual orientation, but rather something that can exist at certain given times as an accepted phase, like the tomboy phase described earlier. Yet the narrator asserts that this gender-bending persona is not something that is going to change—it is a part of her personality in a way that, for her, describes who she is.

To sum up, McCullers challenges stereotypical gender norms in “Like That” through the vehicle of a young, tomboyish girl. The title of this short story exemplifies through its vague and coded reference to “that”, where “that” represents the stereotypical female gender role, that the sort of characteristics and behaviours that our society attributes to females is not a fixed or definite thing. To refer to Sis’s behaviour and new persona as a “that” represents McCullers’s belief that this sort of stereotypical female behaviour is just one way of being and there are alternative ways of being—the word “that” implies that there are other options. McCullers presents a challenge to stereotypical gender roles, which is mostly represented through the narrator’s reaction to her older sister’s transformative relationship to a young man from being the outgoing individual that the narrator grew up with, into a meek, introverted woman whose life appears to revolve around her relationship to this man. In this way, McCullers also challenges the sort of heteronormative love that our society pushes on young boys and girl, as she has her narrator describe Sis’s descent into this relationship as a loss of self. McCullers presents her character as a queer character through her reluctance to adhere to certain gender norms, outward resistance to heteronormative love and her declaration to not grow up “like that”, where the “that” is a stereotypical woman. By challenging the concept of “growing up” into the sort of heteronormative lifestyle described by Bond

Stockton, McCullers presents a character who instead desires to grow “sideways”—a type of growth that Bond Stockton identifies as being queer. McCullers’s presentation of a queer child not only challenges gender roles, but also challenges our very concept “the child” and “childhood”, as our society typically does not attach any sexuality to children whatsoever. Children are not viewed as being sexual beings—this is a label only appropriate for adults—and, as such, cannot have a sexual identity of any sort, despite the fact that children are expected to grow up and accept a heteronormative lifestyle. This challenge is taken up in McCullers’s other works as well, most notably in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*. However, McCullers manages to successfully deconstruct gender roles and the notion of “growing up” within the condensed form of a short story—McCullers expands and broadens her exploration of the binaries between male/female, homosexual/queer and child/adult in the already mentioned novels.

Chapter Two:

The Heart of the Lonely Queer Child: Deconstructing the Category of “the Child” in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

Carson McCullers had her first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, published when she was only twenty-three years old. Despite the fact that McCullers was an unknown and largely inexperienced writer when her first work was published, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is her most widely read and acknowledged piece of writing. In an assessment of her life and work, Eliot Fremont-Smith wrote about the impact of McCullers’s first novel in the front-page obituary for McCullers in the *New York Times*, stating: “it is not so much that [*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*] paved the way for what became the American Southern gothic genre, but that it at once encompassed it and went beyond it...with its sense of intensity, concision and mystery, with its terrible juxtaposition of love and aloneness, whose relation was Mrs. McCullers’s constant subject” (Fremont-Smith, xvii). This theme of a sort of universal loneliness—or “aloneness”, as Fremont-Smith puts it—is what most critics bring up when discussing McCullers’s work. I do not wish to contend with this notion and argue that McCullers was not strongly interested in human loneliness and alienation, especially since McCullers did not write a single short story or novel that did not in some way deal these ideas. However, past critiques of McCullers’s work tend to focus first and foremost on this theme of a sort of general human suffering and, as a result, the social issues that are arguably just as present in McCullers’s work are either viewed as a symptom of this sort of human loneliness. This may be partially true; yet to view McCullers’s work through

such a narrow scope not only diminishes the social issues of sexuality, poverty, gender, race, class, physical disabilities and age that are extremely prevalent in all of McCullers's work, it also limits any sort of positive potential for change that may exist in her work.

McCullers's work is not just a one-dimensional depiction of human loneliness, although it is easy to see how one could come away from a reading of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* with that idea in mind. In his essay "The Utopian Function of Affect in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*", Darren Millar notes that "a survey of McCullers criticism in the decades following the publication of her final novel would indicate that she exposes unhappiness that is spiritually, not historically, derived; that her works are allegorical depictions of loneliness and longing belonging to everyone; that her interest in socially and politically marginalized characters serves primarily to illustrate a universally tragic human condition" (Millar 87). McCullers attempts to bring together characters that feel alienated by all of the above listed social issues (gender, race, class, physical disability) and although these characters suffer in similar ways, McCullers makes it clear that they do not suffer for the same reasons. McCullers draws comparisons to certain social issues and yet she is also careful not to conflate them either.

Also, is it important to note the historical context of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*—to simply view this novel's social critique symbolically completely ignores the historical backdrop and, consequently, eliminates the radical potential that can be found in this novel. For instance, a reader experiencing this novel around the time that it was published in 1940 may have been shocked at the depiction of the African American character Doctor Copeland for his remarkable intelligence, pride, morals and sense of

self-worth—a depiction which, currently, would be far less shocking or provocative. Even McCullers’s depiction of gender would have been much more incendiary in the 1940s than it is now. However, one of the things that would still be deemed as taboo and challenging that is prominently featured in this novel, as well as in McCullers’s other works, is her frank depiction of childhood sexuality and her depiction of children in general. The notion of children as sexual beings, or even having a sexual identity or preference, is a very troubling and heavily disputed topic still in our culture, due largely to the fact that children are most often figured as being “incomplete” people—an idea that largely dehumanizes children.

McCullers presents her young characters in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, whose ages range from three to fifteen, in the same way that she presents her adult characters. They all suffer from feelings of resentment, loneliness, alienation, identity issues and sexual confusion. The way that the adult characters deal with these feelings is not presented as being any more mature or correct than the way that the children deal with them. Some of the adult characters, like Doctor Copeland and Jake Blount, react to their feelings of frustration over class and race aggressively, lashing violently out at those they feel disappointed by. Some of McCullers’s younger characters—most notably the younger brother of Mick Kelly, Bubber-- also lash out due to a feeling of resentment and frustration, yet, unlike Copeland and Blount, feel a deep sense of regret and guilt over their violent reaction. Just like the characters of different races, classes and gender experience the same sort of emotional turmoil as one another, so do the child characters. However far we have come in our society in regarding people of different races and economical classes and gender as being equal—which is not to say that we do not still

struggle with this—the issue of regarding children and teenagers as fully fledged human beings is still an idea that has yet to be explored and dealt with.

Past critiques of McCullers's work have pointed out how McCullers challenges the concepts of race, class, gender and sexuality, but what is missing from these critiques is an exploration of how McCullers also challenges the concept of “the child”. One of the main ways that McCullers challenges this notion is by presenting her young characters as sexual beings. This is not to say that McCullers sexualizes her children in a negative or objectifying way; rather, McCullers simply acknowledges the sexual feelings and urges of all of her characters, both young and old. When children and sexuality are often discussed in our society, children are often figured as objects of desire, with an appeal that they are neither aware of nor in control of. Adults often intellectualize the sexual desire that they feel; yet any sort of sexual behavior from a child is often viewed as a sort of animalistic, primal urge. This sort of thinking that surrounds the way our culture views childhood sexuality also eliminates the possibility for children to have sexual preferences--how could a child prefer, sexually, boys or girls or both when any sort of desire that they have is figured solely as a bodily urge? Also, the child is viewed as in a state of becoming—not quite a person—so any sexual preference that may present itself in childhood is normally not recognized as being anything but a phase.

In James Kincaid's striking, and somewhat controversial, 1998 book *Erotic Innocence: The Culture of Child Molesting*, Kincaid states that “our culture has enthusiastically sexualized the child while denying just as enthusiastically that it was doing any such thing...we have become so engaged with tales of childhood eroticism (molestation, incest, abduction, pornography) that we have come to take for granted the

irrepressible allure of children” (Kincaid 13). Kincaid goes on to explain the negative, dehumanizing effect that this sort of mentality has on children—we view them as abstract, unintentional sexual beings with little to no agency. In an earlier book of Kincaid’s, *Child Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture*, Kincaid traces our current notion of “the child” to the late 18th century “invention” of children, where they were figured as completely separate beings from adults and the particular Victorian obsession and creation of the mythology surrounding “childhood” (Kincaid xxii). In her introduction to *The Case of Peter Pan, Or, The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, Jacqueline Rose states, in regard to the “national crisis” of child sexual abuse in the 1980s in Great Britain and North America, that “if there is widespread sexual abuse of children, then it is not so much the innocence of childhood as the boundary between adult and child, their status as stable and knowable entities, which starts to shake” (Rose xi). Rose describes the sentimentality behind both the Victorian concept and our current concept of the child and declares that “innocence is not a property of childhood” but rather “a portion of adult desire” (xii). Rose goes on to explain what is at stake in our notion of the child and that “if we[adults] do not know what a child is, then it becomes impossible to invest in their sweet self-evidence, impossible to use the translucent clarity of childhood to deny the anxieties we have about our psychic, sexual and social being in the world” (xvii). Rose asserts that our concept of the child, and childhood itself, is an invention that has more to do with how we perceive ourselves as adults. However compelling Rose’s arguments may be, there are, of course, major emotional and physical differences between adults and children. McCullers honors these differences, but she also challenges certain destructive stereotypes about children in a way that highlights

how our adult vision of childhood is, in many ways, a projection. It is precisely through McCullers reluctance to present her child characters as innocent that she deconstructs the very notion of the child and childhood itself.

Although there are numerous minor child characters in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, there are three children that particularly challenge the concept of the child: Mick Kelly, the adolescent tomboy; Bubber, Mick's younger brother who covets women's wear; and Baby Wilson, the three year old niece of the café owner, Biff Brannon. Mick is the most developed out of these three characters and a version of her character—a troubled, lonely tomboyish young girl—is present in McCullers's later novels and short stories. Mick's sexuality and gender-bending ways challenges the very notion of the innocent child. Similarly, the depiction of Mick's younger brother, Bubber, as being extremely intelligent makes it difficult to view his desire to dress like Baby Wilson—who is described as looking, dressing and acting like Shirley Temple—and his violent reaction to his realization that he will never be able to, as an innocent. Baby Wilson challenges the notion of the child in an indirect way—she is constructed as being the stereotypical perfect child and fully embodies all of the meanings that are ascribed to childhood in our culture. However, Baby Wilson is always presented to us at a distance and in that sense she becomes more of an image that is held up and, both literally and metaphorically, shot down by another one of the child characters.

Mick, as one of the main characters in the novel that finds comfort in the deaf-mute, Mister Singer, is comparable to the other adult characters that similarly flock to Mister Singer to discuss their inner turmoil. Mister Singer serves as a sort of blank slate for these characters to project their desires onto, as they are all lonely and isolated feeling

individuals. They all believe Mister Singer to be an inherently wise man that completely understands their personal problems, even though Mister Singer never gives them any sort of outward affirmation of this. It is easy to pinpoint what each of the characters that speaks with Mister Singer is struggling with: Doctor Copeland is disappointed with how African Americans are treated in his town, and in American society in general, but he is especially disturbed by his perception of African Americans' apparent lack of desire to rise up from it; Jake Blount is similarly disappointed by what he sees as "his people"—that is, the working class people of the Deep South—and their reluctance to accept communism as a way to a more equal and fulfilling way of life. Both Doctor Copeland and Jake Blount project onto Mister Singer this image of a man who not only understands their disappointments, but also agrees with their ideas on how to better their society, even though McCullers makes it quite clear that these two men have much more in common with each other than they do with Mister Singer. The reasons for Blount and Doctor Copeland seeking a sort of friendship with Mister Singer are made fairly explicit in the novel, but it is hard to know what exactly it is that Mick Kelly wants from Mister Singer. What identity does Mick feel constrained by? Although past feminist critiques have cited Mick's gender as being her point of contention, I would argue that it is not just Mick's gender, but also Mick's status as a child that makes her feel alienated.

Our first impression of Mick is filtered through the gaze of Biff Brannon-- the café owner and cross-dressing man that secretly loves Mick, although McCullers makes it difficult to decipher if his love is of a fatherly sort or that of a lover. Mick walks into Biff's café in one of the novel's early scenes and is described as "a gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve...dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis

shoes—so that at first glance she was like a very young boy” (McCullers 18). It is interesting to note that Mick is described as looking young, but not as a child, just as she is stated to be a girl, but a girl that has chosen to look more like a boy. The following encounter between Mick and Biff is also very telling of some important aspects of her character—she is out past midnight, but her parents don’t mind; she is never seen with any kids her own age, but either by herself or with her much younger siblings, as she is their primary caregiver; she orders a pack of cigarettes and squabbles with Biff about the price (18). Although this first depiction of Mick is a short one, it is also an incredibly revealing one.

In *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*, Sarah Gleeson-White claims that McCullers’s depiction of Mick’s gender is an especially important one. Gleeson-White writes: “notwithstanding the insistent social demand for conformity that the novels [*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*] register, McCullers’s adolescent portraits embody a dynamic of possibility and thus challenge any notion of female limits” (Gleeson-White 20). It is interesting that Gleeson-White notes the potential found in these female adolescent characters—Mick and Frankie from *The Member of the Wedding*—but only finds potential for the female portion of their characters and ignores the adolescent part. It seems that not only do these characters “embody a dynamic of possibility” for females and “challenge any notion of female limits”, but also embody a dynamic of possibility for our conception of children and challenge this very limiting notion. Gleeson-White is entirely correct to point out that both *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding* register the

“social demand for conformity”, and yet Mick and Frankie are not just limited by their gender, but also by their age.

Mick’s role in her family is a strange one, as she is viewed by society as being too young for most of the things that she desires. However, Mick is largely responsible for a family whose adult members are depicted as either being absent (Mick’s mother, older sisters and brother) or incompetent (Mick’s father). Mick is free to stay out as late she wants, wear what she pleases and behave however she feels, yet feels a sense of responsibility to take care of her younger siblings. Although Mick is one of the younger Kelly kids, she is the one that takes the most care of the family by watching over her two younger siblings, offering emotional support to her unemployed father and, at the novel’s conclusion, dropping out of school and getting a job to help support her family financially. Although Mick clearly feels a sense of duty when it comes to her family, she also feels alienated and lonely by the strange position that her responsibilities put her in. Mick’s responsibilities and role as a sort of surrogate parent cause her to feel oddly out of place with children her own age and she instead surrounds herself with children young enough for her to feel superior over. However, what also makes Mick feel out of place with her peers is her determination to persevere with her more masculine identity, even after she begins to go through puberty.

Mick’s tomboyish dress and attitude is something that is deemed “freakish” in the novel due to the fact that in “the South, tomboyishness may have been acceptable in the young girl, [but] at puberty she was expected to begin the metamorphosis into southern womanhood” (Gleeson-White 13). It is interesting to note the sort of things that are deemed as being “acceptable” in our culture –or at least tolerable—towards

children that are similarly perceived as wrong for adults. For Mick, society deems it alright for her to dress androgynously as a child; however, as she physically develops into a woman, she is expected to dress in a way that corresponds to her changed body and to also present herself in a “feminine” way. But Gleeson-White does not attempt to explore why it was alright in the South for young girls to be tomboys. It seems like society’s reluctance to view children as sexual beings, and therefore without a sexual identity, is partially the cause for this toleration of tomboy behavior. That being said, the same is not true for young boys who dress and behave like girls, which is an issue that McCullers depicts with Mick’s younger brother, Bubber. Also, it is important to note that McCullers is not just writing from the perspective of a woman in the South, but also as a woman writer during the Second World War. During this period of time, there was a great push for American girls to “engage in more feminine forms of tomboyism...thought their gender-bending behavior was a temporary condition of the war effort” (Abate 150). Mick’s refusal to leave her tomboyish ways behind as she goes through puberty is just one of the ways that McCullers deconstructs the divide between the child and the adult and this refusal also deconstructs the divide between gender and sex.

An example of how McCullers deconstructs Mick’s gender and age occurs in the scene where Mick decides to throw a prom party at her parent’s house. Mick borrows her older sister Etta’s “long blue crepe de chine evening dress and some white pumps and a rhinestone tiara for her hair” (McCullers 106). Mick’s lack of “proper” feminine qualities is especially illuminated through her relationship with Etta, who earlier in the novel chastises Mick by saying, “it makes me sick to see you in those silly boy’s clothes. Somebody ought to...make you behave” (41). Gleeson-White interprets Etta’s final

words to really mean “that is, somebody ought to make Mick become a true woman” (Gleeson-White 14). And so Mick tries to follow Etta’s advice, and even dress like her, despite the fact that “she[Mick] was so tall that the dress came up two or three inches above her ankles...finally she decided she either looked like a sap or else she looked very beautiful” (106). Mick makes a point to only invite the people from her school that are the same age or older than her. However, it is evident to the reader that Mick is trying hard to be someone that she is not, which is made clear to us as Mick looks at herself in a mirror and doesn’t “feel like herself at all. She was somebody different from Mick Kelly entirely” (107).

As the night progresses, Mick stresses about every detail of the party, from the food and beverages to the way that the boys and girls have separated themselves. It seems quite evident that Mick’s anxiety stems from her self-consciousness about doing something so foreign to herself—taking on the role of a young, Southern belle. Eventually, the younger kids that Mick normally associates with begin to infiltrate the party and steal all of the punch and josh around with the older kids from Mick’s school. This makes Mick furious and even violent towards one of the kids, but eventually she gives in: “excitement—that was the word...it wasn’t just her dress and the beautiful way her face looked when she passed by the hatrack mirror...it was half playlike and half not playlike at all...everybody was a wild kid playing out on Saturday night—and she felt like the very wildest of all” (114). Mick takes the horsing around to the next level, forgetting the dress and heeled shoes she is wearing and consequently “the high pumps made her slip and her stomach hit this pipe” (115). Mick’s borrowed dress and shoes act as a hindrance, literally in this scene, but clearly McCullers is illustrating how

stereotypical femininity would hinder Mick later on in life if she were to continue to try to be a proper woman. As Mick lies in the bottom of a ditch, having knocked the wind out of herself, she feels changed by the realization that the kids from her school “were not something special but like any other kids” (115). Mick returns home and ignores the play around her and changes back into her boyish street clothes. She ventures out by herself and falls asleep in a stranger’s backyard, listening to the sound of their evening radio. This scene greatly highlights Mick’s feelings of alienation from her peers, as she feels self-conscious and anxious behaving like a proper girl, but also with the kids from the street in general. This brings to mind Rose’s statements about adults deriving a sense of their own identity based on a conception of childhood. Similarly, Mick was attempting to gain a sense of identity that was contingent on her peers and when they failed to live up to her expectations, she is left feeling lost and alone.

Mick describes this feeling of separation from the people around her as having two rooms—“the inside room and the outside room” (161). The feelings, dreams and desires that Mick keeps to herself are all part of the inside room, but she also describes it as a state of being: “the inside room was a very private place. She could be in the middle of a house full of people and still feel like she was locked up by herself” (162). Mick obviously views the inside room as a place of solace, a way to be herself inwardly without having to expose it to those around her. But it is interesting to note that Mick feels “locked up by herself”—the inside room is a positive place for Mick, but in a way it is also a sad place. Mick cannot act upon the desires and feelings that she harbors in this inward room and because of this she feels trapped, or “locked up”. Many of the things that Mick desires for herself are unattainable due to her gender and her age. Mick dreams

of travelling by herself to foreign countries, of listening to and creating her own music and most importantly, meeting people that are like her (162). However, just as Etta's evening gown and heels literally halted Mick's playing around at the party, so too do the constraints of both Mick's age and gender hold her back from the things that she desires most. This causes Mick to behave in strange and secretive ways, like staying out all night in a stranger's back yard, cutting her thigh and palm up with rocks and her later sexual encounter with Harry Minowitz, the boy next door.

The sixteen year old Harry Minowitz is a self-described atheist being brought up in an Orthodox Jewish household. Like many of the other characters in the novel, Harry also feels alienated and freakish by a certain aspect of his character—his Jewish ancestry. Mick describes him as being incredibly sensitive about his religious background, even staying home from school for an entire year after being singled out in class one day. Harry becomes obsessed with the war effort in Europe and constantly talks about his hatred for Germany and Japan, yet also refuses to openly acknowledge his Jewish identity. The more Mick recognizes Harry's feelings of alienation, the more she is drawn to him. Like Mick, Harry also dreams of escaping their small Southern town and travelling to unknown places where he is just as unknown to the people there. Both Mick and Harry want to escape the parts of themselves that they feel are holding them back, which is, of course, an impossibility for Mick. Despite Mick's somewhat young age, she is acutely aware of how her sex can and will be a hindrance. Mick relays her awareness of the inequities between males and females in their community to Harry soon after he gets a job at Biff's café, saying "a boy has a better advantage like that than a girl. I mean a boy can usually get some part-time job that don't take him out of school and leaves him

time for other things. But the're not jobs like that for girls...she has to quit school and work full time. I'd sure like to earn a couple of bucks a week like you do, but there's just not any way" (244). Despite Mick's outward admittance to this, she still secretly dreams in the "inside room" of travelling to New York and Europe to become a world famous conductor, wearing a tuxedo in front of large crowds of people (223). Mick also confides in Harry her desire to "fight the Fascists. I could dress up like a boy and nobody could ever tell. Cut my hair off and all" (243). Although Mick comes across as naïve in her dreaming—naivety being one of the stereotypical traits associated with children—Mick also seems to understand when she discusses the impossibility of her getting a part-time job that her dreams will most likely remain just dreams.

One of the more profound ways that McCullers challenges our concept of the child is her creation of child characters that are just as sexual as their adult counterparts. McCullers presents Mick's sexuality in a subtle and non-objectifying way. As Mick and Harry begin to spend more time with one another, Mick can't help but notice how physically attractive Harry is becoming. In a scene prior to their first, and only, sexual encounter, Mick attempts to break a tense moment of attraction by play-fighting with Harry (230). This sort of touching is in line with the only sort of sexuality that Freud believed children to have, as their touching results not from a "genital urge" but rather is "polymorphous...unfocussed and diffuse" (Rose xv). However, in a later scene between Harry and Mick, after Mick has dared them both to take off their clothes and go skinny-dipping, it is their shared realization that they both have similar dreams of escape that brings them together—their sexual encounter is brought on by an intellectual attraction and sudden feeling of togetherness (McCullers 272). Despite the immediate confusion

and feelings of guilt expressed by Mick and Harry, their coupling occurs not from some base, primal urge, but rather occurs as two very lonely and alienated feeling people feel accepted and a part of something. In this way, Mick and Harry are shown to have a deep and mature sexual experience. Also, the way that McCullers frames this scene makes the conversation and bond between Harry and Mick as the main point of focus—the sexual act is only briefly eluded to. Although this scene reveals Mick’s sexual side, it does not do it in an objectifying way. McCullers crafts this scene in such a way as to show a depth and maturity to these two young characters that is often not associated with children.

Despite Mick’s heterosexual coupling with Harry, Mick’s boyish appearance and her desire to escape her small Southern town and female persona make this coupling a sort of queer one. Shortly after Harry and Mick are intimate, Harry asks Mick if they should get married, to which Mick replies “I never will marry with any boy” (273). Mick may be a sexual person, but she does not have the stereotypical young girl fantasy of weddings and children—Mick’s dreams are self-focused, aside from the people she imagines will be her fans someday. It is also interesting to note that Mick claims she will never “with any boy”—her statement is a rejection to marry a member of the opposite sex, but not a rejection of marriage itself. Harry, who is older by Mick than two years, reacts far less maturely than Mick in their post-coital discussion: he cries, he laments his sins, he proposes marriage and finally tells Mick that he will leave town and get a job as a mechanic somewhere further down state. Mick remains calm and seems sort of baffled by his reaction, especially when Harry cries “you were two years younger than me and just a kid” (273). Mick’s response is to assert “No, I wasn’t. I wasn’t any kid. But now I wish I was, though” (273). This statement is interesting, as it again reveals Mick’s self-

awareness and maturity in comparison to another child character. Technically, Harry—who is sixteen years old—is the one who is closer to adulthood in this situation, yet he is also the one behaving like a stereotypical child. Mick’s declaration that she “isn’t any kid” highlights Mick’s realization that, despite her age, she is not “the kid” in this situation—her intelligence, responsibilities and self-awareness have made her more mature than many of the adults she interacts with in the novel. In this moment, however, Mick feels sad about this and wishes that she did possess a stereotypical childhood, a time of naivety and simplicity, despite the fact that it seems, like Mick’s other dreams, that this too is just a fantasy and idealization for something that Mick never had.

One of the ways in which McCullers illustrates that Mick most likely never had a simple and innocent childhood is through her younger brother, Bubber--or George, as he is later known. Both Mick and Bubber spend a lot of time together, dragging their baby brother Ralph around in a wagon. Bubber is an avid reader and Mick describes him as “always so thin and little and smart” (170). Bubber also loves “pretty things” that come in the form of women’s wear. He covets everything about Baby Wilson, from her golden curls to her gymnastic and dancing skills, but Bubber mostly loves Baby’s pink and frilly clothes. Mick recalls how “all last summer Baby had come out in the pink soiree costume and danced in the middle of the street...soon they got tired of it. Bubber was the only one who would watch her as she came out to dance...he had watched Baby do her soiree dance a hundred times” (164). As Bubber watches Baby in one scene, he lusts after her pink pocketbook and laments “I sure do wish I had a costume...a real pretty one made out of all different colors. Like a butterfly” (164). Bubber is immediately deemed “a sissy” by one of the other kids, a statement which illustrates the lack of social

acceptance for boys to dress like girls, despite the fact that no one seemed to make fun of Mick when she was younger for dressing more like a boy. Bubber seems to be aware of this contradiction, an awareness which eventually yields a violent reaction out of Bubber. Bubber's desire to have a costume "like a butterfly" is also very telling, as it illustrates Bubber as a character who wishes to go through the sort of metamorphosis that butterflies go through—from creepy, crawly worm to a beautiful, winged insect. Bubber's butterfly comment explains his desire for Baby Wilson's clothes in light of how he sees himself; clearly, Bubber views himself as the worm in this situation, where overtly feminine girls like Baby Wilson are the butterflies.

Shortly after Spareribs calls Bubber a "sissy" Bubber calls out and pleads to Baby to let him touch her pocketbook and costume. All while Bubber is doing this, he is also playing with Spareribs's father's rifle. Despite Spareribs warning to Bubber that the gun is loaded, Bubber raises the rifle and shoots Baby in the head as she ignores his pleas (165). McCullers makes it hard to know whether or not Bubber deliberately shot Baby, or even if he knows what it means to shoot a person. It seems fair to claim that Bubber at least partially knew what he was doing, as he is warned by Spareribs that the gun is loaded and to not touch the trigger. Also, Bubber deliberately aims the gun at Baby and pulls the trigger as he calls out to her in frustration. Bubber was just made fun of by Spareribs, and also ignored by Baby Wilson, who won't even acknowledge that Bubber is calling out to her. The way that McCullers crafts this scene illustrates Jacqueline Rose's claim that "innocence is not a property of childhood" (Rose xii). McCullers parallels this scene to a prior scene where Doctor Copeland thinks back to his relationship with his wife and how, in a violent frustration fuelled rage, he beats his wife to near death. Doctor

Copeland's desire to have his children follow in his own footsteps is brought down by his wife's insistence on teaching them about Christianity and letting them dress and be as they please. He projects his frustration onto his wife, who he views as the object of his rejection—just as Bubber views Baby as this unattainable thing that is rejecting him. Yet Bubber's lack of innocence is twofold in a way, as what he yearns for is not just unattainable, but also the queer tinged desire to dress up like a woman and dance provocatively—Bubber's admiration of Baby does not reveal a desire to be with Baby, but rather to be like Baby.

Gender is another aspect that the adults of this society project onto the child characters, which is especially illustrated through both Mick's and Bubber's desire to dress like the opposite sex. McCullers does not present Bubber's or Mick's desire as an abnormal thing and the apparent wrongness of it is clearly not something that McCullers agreed with. Both Mick's and Bubber's gender-bending desire, and at least Mick's lack of desire for a heteronormative relationship, makes them both queer characters. Yet they are not the only characters to contest gender, as Biff wonders "why was it that the smartest people mostly missed that point? By nature all people are of both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means" (McCullers 132). But this is not just a thing that Biff wonders to himself, but also something he acts on his own life as he begins to dress in his dead wife's clothes in the seclusion of his home. Also, Biff admits to himself that he himself proves the absurdity of society's rules surrounding gender and sexuality, as he thinks about his own desire to be "a mother to Baby and Mick"—not a father (132). Biff also seems to be acutely aware of how, at least, Baby's mother projects her own ideals of the perfect child onto Baby. Biff is also attuned to how Mick, Doctor

Copeland and Blount project their own ideals onto Mister Singer. Unfortunately, Biff is the only character—and adult—that seems to be aware of the possible damage that this sort of projection can have on both the objects of projection and projectors themselves.

McCullers also tackles the adult projection of an ideal child through her descriptions of Baby Wilson. Baby is presented differently in comparison to the other child characters, as McCullers illustrates the adult construction of “the child” by portraying Baby as exhibiting all of the stereotypical attributes of childhood. Baby is the daughter of Biff Brannon’s sister-in-law, Lucille, a hairdresser who wasted her youth chasing after Baby’s father, only to have him desert her in the end. Lucille invests everything she has into Baby’s future as an actress, despite the fact that Baby is only three years old. In a conversation between Biff and Lucille, she claims that “every time Baby and I go to the movies and see these kids in all the good roles she feels the same way I do. I swear she does...I feel like I got to push Baby all I can. Because the sooner she gets started on her career the better it’ll be for both of us” (125). Lucille curls Baby’s hair every day and eventually pays a good portion of her salary to take her down to Atlanta to get a permanent wave—the rest of her money goes towards Baby’s costumes and her dancing, piano and expression lessons. Lucille constantly tells Baby that she is different from other children—above “their level”—and that she will be famous one day. Baby, in turn, behaves above the other children and is either always alone or with her mother, constantly performing and on display.

Biff notes that Baby “looks sad” as she shows off her dancing skills to him; however, this is only instance where we are given any insight into Baby’s feelings. We only witness Baby through the gaze of the other characters, who mostly watch her from

afar. Before Bubber shoots her, Baby is described as constantly performing for others, from the way she dances for Biff, to the way she prances down the street in front of Mick, Bubber and the other street kids. Bubber does not kill Baby, despite shooting her in the head. Baby's skull is fractured and she has to have all of her hair shaven off during surgery. She doesn't suffer any brain damage, but Lucille laments to Biff that "if a child is kept clean and well cared for and pretty then that child will usually be sweet and smart...if a child's dirty and ugly then you can't expect anything much...Baby is so shamed over losing her hair and that bandage on her head that it just seems like it makes her cut the buck all the time...she won't do a thing" (228). Biff lets Lucille know that Baby's behavior now is based on this attitude of Lucille's. Lucille has focused all of her attention on how Baby looks and presents herself and, as such, Baby has picked up on the fact that all of her worth as a child is based on her outer appearance. Without her hair, Baby does not know how to act—she knows she looks strange with a bandage on her head, but she only knows how to perform for others and garner attention based on her pretty looks. Without her looks, Baby does nothing—she won't "practice her elocution", dance or behave like a proper little lady, as she used to (228). Baby's disfiguration and consequent misbehavior highlight how the "perfect child"—a child that embodies innocence, but is also an object of desire-- is just an image. All it takes is Baby's losing her hair for her to become just as confused, rejected and alienated as Mick and Bubber.

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter has a somewhat troubling and depressing ending for all of the characters, but especially the child characters. Harry Minowitz feels so ashamed over his sexual encounter with Mick that he drops out of school, flees the town and works in an even smaller town as a mechanic; Baby Wilson has lost her sense of self-

worth, and her mother's affection, due to her head injury; Bubber refuses to associate with anyone and behaves in weird, secretive ways that Mick acknowledges is more like "an angry old man". One of the saddest endings of all is how Mick's life changes due both to her finding Mister Singer dead and Bubber's shooting Baby Wilson. The Kellys, who were in a bad state financially to begin with, agree to pay Lucille for Baby's hospital costs, as well as for the permanent Baby received prior to the accident and for the pink costume that was ruined when Baby was shot. Although all of the members of the Kelly family are impacted by the financial consequences of Bubber's actions, the older siblings are old enough to leave and lead lives of their own. This means that the onus falls on Mick to help her family.

Lucille's financial demands bankrupts the Kellys and, at the novel's conclusion, Mick has fallen into "the trap" of her gender that she relayed to Harry earlier—she cannot work part-time as a girl and so she is forced to drop out of school and work full time at a department store. Mick laments this sacrifice, as she thinks "what the hell good it was...all the plans she had made, and the music...when all that came of it was this trap—the store, then home to sleep, and back at the store again" (347). What was depicted as Mick's strength before—her bodily strength, her stamina, her ability to take on responsibilities—is taken advantage of at her work: "whenever there was overtime the manager always told her to stay...she could stand longer on her feet and work harder before giving out than any other girl" (347). Mick's feelings of allegiance towards her family have trapped her in her assigned gender role, despite her incredibly strong desire to escape. Mick's job forces her to "keep on her toes and smile" and she is also forced to wear a dress, stockings and jewelry—all of which make Mick feel incredibly

uncomfortable (348). Mick feels a sense of hopelessness and has obviously given up on her dreams for the future, as she notes “she wanted to stay in the inside room but she didn’t know how...it was like the inside room was locked somewhere away from her” (350). However, despite Mick’s incredibly mature behavior at the novel’s end, she is still technically a child. Though Mick feels trapped by her circumstances, McCullers still manages to challenge our concept of “the child” by depicting Mick’s strength, sense of responsibility and inner emotional turmoil while being only fourteen years old.

To conclude, Carson McCullers challenges our concept of “the child” through the various child characters in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. These child characters display the same amount of emotional depth as the adult characters, despite their limited circumstances. Mick and Bubber are both described as sexual beings and queer characters—two things that our society generally does not associate with children. Childhood is not depicted as an idyllic time of innocence in this novel, as the child characters must bear through the same sorts of hardships as their adult counterparts. By having child characters that are intelligent, responsible, sexual and queer, McCullers forces her readers to re-think how children are conceived in our society.

Chapter Three:

The Queer Child's Vision of the Perfect World in *The Member of the Wedding*

In real life, as in her work, Carson McCullers was a constant storyteller. Carlos L. Dews, the editor of McCullers's unfinished autobiography *Illuminations and Night Glare*, describes the difficulty he faced in editing her autobiography due to her "penchant for exaggeration...she provides details that contradict accepted versions of some events as published in previous biographies and that encourage revisionary scholarship on her life story" (Dews xix). So perhaps the widely believed story about McCullers getting the inspiration for *The Member of the Wedding* occurring after an alcohol filled Thanksgiving weekend that ended with McCullers and Gypsy Lee running through the street after being spooked by the sounds of a distant fire engine is just another one of McCullers's fabricated truths. *The Member of the Wedding*—like *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*—features a lonely and alienated feeling adolescent tomboy. However, instead of exploring and connecting the alienation of several different characters representative of certain social issues, as in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers instead chooses to narrow her focus onto a young queer character, Frankie Addams. Frankie is comparable to *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*'s Mick in many ways—both characters are abnormally tall for their age; dress and behave in a tomboyish way; feel alienated by other children their own age and spend a lot of time by themselves or with much younger family members. Yet, there is something about McCullers's construction of Frankie that is a bit more refined and nuanced than the development of Mick. That being said, both novels present an

astoundingly honest portrayal of children and childhood sexuality that is unusual and somewhat groundbreaking even by today's standards.

Sarah Gleeson-White notes how most readers of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding* view Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams "as either freaks or grotesques, arising from the girls' apparent boyishness" (Gleeson-White 11). Gleeson-White goes on to point out the importance though in recognizing that "there are elements in common[between these terms], the categories of freak and grotesque are quite distinct...the clarification of these terms radically alters how we read McCullers's narratives of adolescence" (11). Heavily influenced by Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on the grotesque, Gleeson-White argues throughout her book *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers* that the grotesque represents the "promise and potential" in certain "othered" identities. However, Gleeson-White focuses mostly on gender and gender identity. Although she notes and takes the adolescence of Frankie and Mick into consideration, she does not discuss how McCullers's adolescent "grotesque" characters also challenge and deconstruct our notion of "the child" and "childhood" itself. Though McCullers is quite successful in this deconstruction in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, she further challenges this concept in *The Member of the Wedding* by focusing more heavily on the young characters, instead of spending an equal amount of time on the issues of race and class, as she does in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

As noted earlier, Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding* is, in many ways, fairly similar to Mick Kelly. On the surface, the girls' similarities are fairly obvious: both Mick and Frankie are exceptionally tall for their ages, have crew-cut type hair styles, feel most comfortable dressed in boys' clothes and behave, outwardly, in

ways that are also stereotypically associated with young males. Excepting the conclusion to *The Member of the Wedding*, Mick and Frankie are also alienated by their peers and spend most of their time either alone or with a younger member of the family. Mick and Frankie deal with their feelings of isolation and loneliness by projecting an imagined and hoped for relationship onto another person—or people, in Frankie’s case. Mick is one of several characters guilty of this sort of projection in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, yet Frankie’s projection is unusual and not shared by any of the other characters in the novel. Both Mick and Frankie fantasize of escaping their lives, their identities, and view their objects of projection as a sort of catalyst for this escape. However, in Mick’s dreams, Mister Singer is a friend and fan who does not participate or aid in her ventures—Frankie dreams of being the third person in a two person marriage. It is precisely Frankie’s desire to make her brother’s marriage to a woman named Janice a three person affair a somewhat queer desire. Frankie not only longs to leave behind the expectations placed on her as a young female in the Southern United States, but also to escape the societal pressure for heteronormative relationships. Yet, this queer desire of Frankie’s is just one of the ways that McCullers challenges the concept of the child.

Frankie, like Mick, spends a good deal of time with a younger member of her family. Frankie’s young cousin, John Henry, is somewhat similar to *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*’s Bubber. John Henry is small and thin for his age and has trouble connecting to other boys his age due largely to his penchant for “pretty things” (McCullers 28). Like Bubber, John Henry is viewed as a “sissy boy”. However, McCullers takes more time and care in her construction of John Henry and his gender bending behavior is more developed and explored in *The Member of the Wedding*. John

Henry admits to Frankie that he likes to dress up in his mother's clothes and takes a strong interest in the cook Berenice's story about a homosexual man named Lily Mae Jenkins. Also, it is important to note the irony in McCullers naming this young, effeminate character "John Henry", who is the American folk hero whose prowess as a steel-driver earned him his place in American folklore as the man who raced against a steam-powered hammer and won. It seems highly unlikely that McCullers was not aware of the historical connotation that this name carried when she named her character this.

McCullers's two young characters in *The Member of the Wedding* deconstruct gender and sexual identity through their gender-bending behavior, lack of interest in heterosexual relationships and, at least in Frankie's case, queer sexual desire. However, all of the ways in which McCullers challenges gender and sexual norms in this novel also serves to challenge our society's concept of "the child" and childhood. This brings us, again, to the argument made by Kathryn Bond-Stockton in *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* that the child, as an idea, exists as a state of becoming "figured as vertical movement upward (hence, "growing up") toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness" (Stockton 4). Frankie obviously cannot stop herself from physically growing up—though she expresses a fear that by her eighteenth birthday she will be "over nine feet tall...and what would be a lady over nine feet tall? She would be a freak" (McCullers 17). But Frankie's desire to "somehow stop herself from growing" goes beyond her physical growth; Frankie also has no desire to grow up and be a part of a heterosexual union or a mother (16). Frankie desires the freedom that being a man could afford to her—she especially wishes to travel to Europe as a soldier or to go on adventures in her imagined three person marriage of her

brother, Jarvis, Janice and herself. Both Frankie and John Henry repel and rebel against what they know they are expected to grow up into. Their childhood—especially Frankie’s—is depicted as anything but a time of innocence. Like Mick, Frankie is depicted as an intellectual and sexual character, which are two things that our society rarely attributes to children.

Before a discussion of how McCullers challenges our society’s concept of the child can be had, it is important to understand what is meant when describing Frankie and John Henry as queer characters. According to Gleeson-White, one of the most important factors to understanding McCullers’s “representations of grotesque desire is her own belief in the essential bisexuality of all human subjects and her frequent references to her own sexual and gender ambiguity” (Gleeson-White 40). Virginia Spencer Carr notes in her biography of McCullers that “she felt she was born a man and believed herself to be an invert” (Carr 59). This sort of queer behavior is evident throughout *The Member of the Wedding*, from John Henry’s cross-dressing desires, to Frankie’s obsession over joining the marriage between Jarvis and Janice, to Frankie’s later encounter with a young, drunk soldier and, finally, with Frankie’s all-consuming friendship with a girl named Mary. Though McCullers’s characters never openly state a sexual desire for a member of the same sex, that does not mean that those feelings are not there, as McCullers makes them evident in other ways. Although homosexuality was a known term in the decades prior to this novel being written, it was something that was viewed by North American society at large as an illness. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that the binaries of “knowledge/ignorance, initiation/innocence, and secrecy/disclosure” structure and underlie the binary opposition that exists between

homosexuality and heterosexuality (Sedgwick 3). McCullers's somewhat veiled descriptions of her characters' queer desires especially fits into the final binary of "secrecy/disclosure", as this sort of desire was still deemed as being wrong. There are heterosexual relationships present in *The Member of the Wedding* that are presented in a straight forward, open manner, which opposes the veiled, hinted at queer desires felt by Frankie and John Henry. However, it is clearly the veiled desires that McCullers is interested in, as the majority of the plot of this novel revolves around Frankie struggling to come to terms with it.

As previously stated, McCullers's deconstruction of gender and sexual identity in *The Member of the Wedding* also serves to deconstruct our society's conception of the child. Children are viewed as being in a perpetual state of becoming, as if when they finally reach a certain age they will have a set identity that will stay with them until they die. This is a ridiculous notion, of course, as the categories of "child" and "adult" are often arbitrarily just based on age. The age at which one enters adulthood also differs in different cultures, which further illustrates the arbitrariness of these categories. Yet, we, as adults, have a lot invested in how we conceive childhood—the way childhood is defined often says more about how we are expected to live our lives as adults. Childhood is romanticized, as we imagine it as an idyllic time of innocence and carefree fun. Again, this sort of idealization of childhood is ridiculous; children are not one homogenous group that suddenly branch out and develop distinct personalities as they age. Class, race, genetics and circumstance largely affect children from a very young age and make childhood a unique experience for every individual child. Despite the fact that something like this seems like it should be common knowledge, childhood is still romanticized in

our culture in films, television shows, literature, media and elsewhere. This romanticization of childhood, alongside so much of what we refuse to associate with children—namely sexual desire and identity—can, in some cases, negatively sexualize children.

Children are “othered” in our culture—some more so than others, depending on their situation. The fact that children are viewed as being in a perpetual state of becoming means that they are also conceptualized as being not quite human. Jacqueline Rose in *The Case of Peter Pan, or The Impossibility of Children’s Fiction*, points out how the Victorians illustrated this belief by referring to children as “half people”(Rose xvi). To return to Stockton Bond’s claim that the child, as an idea, is always viewed in a state of “vertical movement upward (hence, “growing up”) toward full stature, marriage, work, reproduction, and the loss of childishness” (Stockton 4) is important for two reasons in relation to childhood sexuality. According to this notion of the child, a queer child cannot exist—neither can, theoretically, a heterosexual child. Instead, children can have certain inclinations towards sexuality, but never a fully figured sense of being. However, if one were to follow Stockton Bond’s claim through, then an adult should have a fully figured sense of being, including their sexual identity. To deny a sexual identity to a child because they are still growing, emotionally and physically, is to also deny sexual fluidity to adults, since they are supposed to be done growing. If one can recognize the ridiculousness of the latter portion of that claim, then the same view should be taken in regards to children. McCullers, who was extremely invested in the exploration of human sexual mutability, presents sexual desire that is fluid and not

dependent on age or sex, and it is precisely through her exploration of this that she deconstructs the concept of the child.

One of the more revealing scenes in *The Member of the Wedding* that highlights the young characters' queer identities occurs when Berenice (the cook and nanny), Frankie and John Henry discuss their idea of the perfect world. Frankie's world would have "one War Island...where those who wanted to could go and fight or donate blood, and she might go for awhile as a WAC in the Air Corps...she planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted" (McCullers 92). Berenice disagrees with Frankie's ideas on human sex, but John Henry adds that he believes "people ought to be half boy and half girl" (92). Frankie's and John Henry's dream world brings to mind something that Biff Brannon says in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* while he studies Mick's clothing. Biff remarks to himself that "by nature all people are of both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means" (McCullers 132). Although Biff is an adult character in a separate novel, it seems highly unlikely that McCullers presents Frankie's and John Henry's declarations about human sex in such a way as to highlight their naivety in one novel, only to have one of the more wise and thoughtful adult characters in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* express the same thing. Instead, it is Berenice, the adult in the conversation, who comes across as somewhat immature and closed-minded when she responds that "the law of human sex was exactly right just as it was and could in no way be improved"(92). Berenice's faith in "the law of human sex" extends to her belief in heterosexual love as the only right sort of relationship. Berenice herself has been married

four times and attempts to push her own beliefs about love and desire on both Frankie and John Henry, though she is largely unsuccessful in this endeavor.

McCullers uses Berenice as a means to impart the sort of conventional stereotypes surrounding gender and sexuality that both Frankie and John Henry are faced with within their town and American society in general. For instance, when Frankie asks Berenice how Jarvis and Janice looked when they came to visit, Berenice replies “why, they looked natural” (27). For Berenice, a “natural” couple is synonymous with a heterosexual couple—anything that falls outside of that category is unnatural. Berenice later explicitly voices her feelings over “unnatural” relationships when she tells Frankie and John Henry about Lily Mae Jenkins, a man who “prisses around with a pink satin blouse and one arm akimbo... Lily Mae fell in love with a man named Juney Jones... he changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl... you don’t need to know Lily Mae Jenkins, you can live without knowing him” (76). By this Berenice seems to be saying that one should be able to go through life without having to experience, second-hand, such “unnatural” things. Berenice further illustrates this belief when she tries to distract Frankie away from her obsession, or “crush” as Berenice deems it, on Jarvis and Janice as a couple. Berenice suggests that what Frankie needs is “a nice little white boy beau” (77). Although Frankie has no interest in having a “beau”, she does attempt to quench the loneliness and desire she feels in other ways.

For Frankie, it is love at first sight when she sees her brother, Jarvis, and his fiancée for the first time together. Frankie becomes obsessed with them and constantly runs over the way they looked, the things they said and the way they behaved. For Frankie “it was as though when first she saw them something she had known inside of

her: *They are the we of me*" (40). There are several references made to Frankie's lack of friends—she is shunned by the girls' club in her neighborhood and her only friend recently moved to Florida. Frankie is lonely and feels like she doesn't belong anywhere. She is attracted to the "natural" pairing of her brother and Janice, yet her attraction towards their relationship does not yield in a desire for her to find a mate of her own. Frankie also doesn't desire to take Janice's place or Jarvis's place in the relationship—instead, she longs to be the third person in their marriage. Frankie explains her desire to John Henry by claiming "I love the two of them so much. We'll go every place together. It's like I've known it all my life, that I belong to be with them"(43). Frankie feels alienated due to her gender-bending behavior from her peers—both male and female—as she knows that she doesn't quite belong to either group. Frankie describes the way she felt before seeing Jarvis and Janice as being haunted by an "old question" of "who she was and what she would be in the world and why she was standing there that minute...[she would]feel hurt and unanswered" (43). Frankie believes that Jarvis and Janice, together, are the answer—she is a part of them and they of her. Yet, it seems that Frankie is actually attracted to the idea of certain male qualities and certain female qualities coming together as a unit. Frankie does not want to be one half of such a unit, but rather to encompass the couple as one thing. It is Frankie's way of having her dream world where people could "change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted" (92), except that Frankie wouldn't be the boy or the girl in the relationship—Frankie would be something that is in-between.

Prior to Frankie's love for Jarvis and Janice, she attempted to try out some sexual behavior with another boy her age named Barney MacKean. McCullers only allows us to

know what occurred between Frankie and Barney in bits and pieces, as Frankie seems so thoroughly repulsed by her heterosexual experimentation as to try to block it out. Earlier in the novel Frankie recalls her restlessness and loneliness at the beginning of the summer and the things it drove her to do, such as the “secret and unknown sin...in the MacKean’s garage, with Barney MacKean, they committed a queer sin...the sin made a shriveling sickness in her stomach and she dreaded the eyes of everyone” (23). Frankie is reminded of the “secret sin” later on in the novel when Berenice suggests that Frankie take Barney on as “beau”. Barney’s name evokes memories of the dark garage “with thin needling sunlight coming through the cracks of the closed door... she did not let herself remember the unknown sin that he had showed her, that later made her want to throw a knife between his eyes” (78). It seems likely that Barney and Frankie went alone into his garage where Barney, presumably, exposed his genitals to her. Frankie feels physically repulsed by an act that for someone like Berenice would be considered “natural”—for Frankie, it is unnatural and unwelcome. Whether or not Frankie participated in this “unknown sin” is left a mystery to us, though Frankie’s angry reaction to whatever Barney did is echoed in another scene later on in the novel.

In the day preceding the wedding, Frankie, who seems to be high on love, decides to walk around the town one final time. She gets the courage to go into the local bar The Blue Moon where she meets a young intoxicated soldier. Frankie chats up everyone she meets and tells them about the wedding and her plans to leave with her brother and his fiancée after the wedding. Yet Frankie misreads the drunk soldier’s reaction to her story and the soldier, who is described as being extremely inebriated, thinks Frankie is coming on to him. The soldier drunkenly asks Frankie to come back to

the bar later in the evening where he has a hotel room above the bar. The soldier obviously has sexual intentions in mind, which is something that the love-struck (on the wedding) Frankie does not pick up on. When Frankie shows up at the bar later, the soldier talks to her in a way she cannot understand: “it was again as though the soldier talked a kind of double-talk that, try as she would, she could not follow—yet it was not so much the actual remarks as the tone underneath she failed to understand” (127). When the soldier invites Frankie upstairs, she realizes that she does not want to be there with him, but “she did not know how to refuse...it was like going into a fair booth that once having entered you cannot leave until the exhibition or the ride is finished” (128). Up until this point, Frankie had not viewed the soldier as an individual person; rather, the soldier was for her a “member of the loud free gangs who for a season roamed the streets of town and then went out into the world together” (129). Frankie is not attracted to the soldier as a person, but rather what he represents—adventure, freedom and other masculine attributes that Frankie wants to possess herself.

Just as Frankie’s desire for the wedding is not directed at one particular member, so too is Frankie’s attraction for the soldier not directed at him as a person. Frankie sees both her brother and his fiancée and this soldier as representations of a type of life that Frankie wants to lead. The soldier misreads Frankie’s interest in him and when he has her alone in his room Frankie can no longer “see him anymore in Burma, Africa or Iceland...he seemed to her unjoined and ugly...she saw him only as he sat there in the room” (129). As the soldier calls out to her in a voice described as “unnatural” and pulls her down onto the bed, Frankie becomes paralyzed by fear and reacts by biting down on his tongue. As the soldier lunges for her, Frankie hits him over the head with a water

pitcher and he falls to the floor unconscious. Frankie flees before even knowing if he is alive or not. For Frankie, the soldier's sexually turned on voice is "unnatural" because, for her, heteronormative sex is not natural. What is interesting in this scene is the way that Frankie—who, for the soldier, is an object of desire—refuses to give in to the soldier's desire. She is a sexual child but she has agency over her sexuality and knows where her desire lies. Frankie does not desire a heteronormative coupling and will not be pushed into one by any person. Her feelings over this are so strong that she reacts with violence—her body physically enacts what she knows in her mind that she does not want. We view children as being vulnerable and Frankie certainly was naïve to follow the soldier up to his room. However, Frankie is self aware enough to know what she does and does not want.

The wedding, of course, does not go the way Frankie hopes it would. Frankie imagines that the town the wedding is being held at, Winter Hill, as somewhere cold and exotic to her. However, Winter Hill is a small Southern American town much like the town Frankie and John Henry live in. Frankie detests the way she is treated "like a child" by everyone at the wedding, from the bride's family to the objects of Frankie's desire, the bride and groom (137). The way that Frankie is treated at the wedding renders her unable to properly speak to Jarvis and Janice about her feelings. Throughout the entire wedding Frankie is only able to watch from a distance as if she were "in a dream beyond her control" until she finally sneaks into their honeymoon car, all the while screaming "take me!" (138). To the wedding party, Frankie's behavior makes it seem as if she just wants to go on vacation and her father and another man are forced to carry her from the car. No one understands Frankie's true desire and instead read her pleas as the cries of a jealous

child who doesn't want to be left out. Frankie describes the wedding as a "framed game...the cards were stacked. It was a frame-up all along" (139). McCullers seems to be suggesting through Frankie's words that for people like Frankie, who have not adhered to traditional gender norms and a heteronormative lifestyle, that the world is not set up for them. People are not willing or looking to understand other desires and people like Frankie and John Henry often get left behind, disappointed and heart broken. Yet Frankie returns home in defiance, thinking "the wedding had not included her, but she would still go into the world" (140).

Like *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *The Member of the Wedding* has a fairly tragic ending for at least one of the child characters. Frankie attempts to run away after returning from Winter Hill, but as she roams the nighttime streets she comes to the sudden realization that "for now...she was too scared to go into the world alone" (148). Frankie is picked up by the police before she can leave the town, but at this point her worldview has quickly changed. Like Mick in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Frankie loses sight of her dreams and instead feels trapped, as she considers how "she would not be carried to the jail. In a way she was sorry. It was better to be in jail where you could bang the walls than in a jail you could not see" (148). After this revelation, McCullers sums up the final events of the novel in a few pages: Frankie moves with her father and John Henry's parents to a new house in a suburb outside of the town; Berenice quits and decides to get married for a fifth time; John Henry contracts meningitis and dies a slow and agonizing death and, finally, Frankie falls in love with her a girl Mary. Mary is two years older than Frankie and they have decided together that "when Frances was sixteen and Mary eighteen, they were going around the world together" (150). Frances

describes her feelings for Mary as a “touch of strangeness, silent terror, that completed the wonder of her love” (151). Frankie’s object(s) of desire have gone from being Jarvis and Janice, together, to Mary Littlejohn—yet it appears that, unlike the married couple, Frankie’s love for Mary is not unrequited. This final love of Frankie’s solidifies her character as a queer child.

The ending of *The Member of Wedding* is both positive and negative. It is wonderful that Frankie is able to find a partner in life who shares her same abhorrence for gender norms and returns her feelings of love. However, the death of John Henry is tragic and disturbing. John Henry is described as a sweet boy who enjoys dressing in his mother’s and Berenice’s clothes. He can get away with his cross-dressing behavior due to his sweet nature and general oddities—he is described as being easy to love, despite his “quirks” (78). However, John Henry is quite young in the novel and the impression is given that John Henry would not be able to get away with his proclivity for wearing women’s clothing for much longer—it would eventually go from being just a cute thing that a very young child was doing to something that would be deemed as wrong and unnatural by society in general. This impression is given through Berenice’s telling of Lily Mae Jenkins, the man who fell in love with another man and “changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl” (76). Berenice gives Lily Mae as an example of the extraordinarily horrible things she has witnessed in her life—the grotesque things—and parallels this story to “women coming to love veritable Satans and thank Jesus when they put their split hooves over the threshold” (75). For Berenice, a man loving another man is wrong and comparable to a woman loving a devilish, evil minded man. The comparison Berenice draws between these two sorts of love reveals her belief that not

only is it wrong for two men to have a romantic relationship, but that it is also a destructive and evil thing. That being said, Berenice herself admits to Frankie and John Henry that she once married an “evil minded man” who eventually gauged out one of Berenice’s eyes and robbed her (73). McCullers reveals, through Berenice’s comparison between homosexual love and the sort of physically abusive relationship she had with her ex-husband, that even a prudent and judgmental person like Berenice are, at times, victims of their own desires. This is not to say that McCullers agrees with Berenice’s opinion on queer desire being comparable to a person loving an ill-minded “evil” person. However, Berenice’s words seem to go along with the exploration McCullers is making on the destructive nature of love and desire, no matter what the form, throughout the novel—be it Frankie’s love for an engaged couple, Berenice’s marriage to a physically violent man or Lily Mae Jenkin’s homosexual relationship with another man during a time in American history when homosexuality was still considered to be a form of mental illness.

John Henry does not pick up on Berenice’s tone while she is telling the story of Lily Mae Jenkins and instead desperately wants to know how it is that a man can turn himself into a girl. McCullers gives her readers the impression that John Henry, through his cross-dressing habits and intense interest in stories about people like Lily Mae, is deeply invested in the idea of being able to take on a female persona. John Henry’s idea of the perfect world contained people who were all “half boy and half girl”. Frankie also notes earlier on in the novel that John Henry was especially fascinated by the “half-man/half-woman” character in a “freak show” that Berenice takes them to (32). Both Frankie and John Henry identify with this particular “freak” in the show, but Frankie

feels frightened and repulsed by this character and fears that she will grow up and be a “freakish spectacle”(33). Unlike Frankie, John Henry is delighted by the half-man, half-woman character and seems excited to see an example of the sort of person he imagined in his perfect world in real life. Tragically, McCullers does not let us know how a queer character like John Henry gets on in the world, as his life is cut short at the novel’s conclusion. John Henry’s death is perplexing, as it is hard to know why McCullers chose to end the novel in this way. Did she fear that her novel would not be accepted if this young, male queer character were to grow up? Or did she just want to give the novel a somewhat tragic ending?

McCullers’s queer child characters act as sites of radical resistance. McCullers incorporates the trope of the unfinished--which is associated with the majority of her young characters in her other novels and short stories-- in order to underwrite the subjective categories of age and gender. However, she literally finishes off one of her young queer characters by having him die a tragic and untimely death at *The Member of the Wedding*’s conclusion. The other queer character, Frankie, goes through “the changes” of menarche, yet does not leave her tomboyish ways behind (151). Rather, Frankie takes her queer identity a step further, as she falls in love with a girl named Mary Littlejohn who, unlike Jarvis and Janice, returns Frankie’s love. McCullers challenges our concept of the child through her deconstruction of gender and sexuality through the vehicle of these young queer characters. Though this novel is written in third-person, it still closely follows Frankie and John Henry and personalizes all of their actions and thoughts. If McCullers were to have shown these characters more at a distance it seems likely that their actions would seem immature, their summer activities as innocent and

their gender-bending behavior as just play. McCullers allows us to know these child characters and it is because of this that we, the readers, are able to recognize their full potential as human beings.

Conclusion:

Deconstructing the Child with Love and Desire in the Works of Carson McCullers

“First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons—but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved. There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries,” declares the narrator in Carson McCullers’s novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (McCullers 25). He goes on to state that “often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored up love which has lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto...this lover can be a man, woman, child or indeed any human creature on this earth...the beloved can also be of any description. The most outlandish people can be the stimulus for love” (26). This vision of love described in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* clearly illustrates McCullers’s own feelings on human love and relationships and it acknowledges her acceptance and celebration of sexual fluidity. For McCullers, love and desire was not a thing limited to the adult world, as any “lover can be a man, woman, child” (25). Love and desire cut across the often arbitrary borders of race, class, gender and age and McCullers dedicates her writing to the deconstruction of these categories and to triumph and celebrate human difference. The love in McCullers’s work may be unrequited, but all of her characters of different races, social classes, gender and age all go through the same feelings of alienation and loneliness in such a way as to connect them and join them in their human experiences.

Despite McCullers's constant focus on human love and suffering, the social critiques that are present in her work should be taken seriously and not just read symbolically. Recent critiques have taken on the social issues that are disseminated in McCullers's work, most notably Sarah Gleeson-White's *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*; yet the one issue that seems to have fallen to the wayside is McCullers's challenge to our notion of the child and childhood. In *The Member of the Wedding*, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and the short story "Like That", McCullers's deconstruction of gender and sexuality are inextricably entwined with her deconstruction of the child and the fact that this has not been seriously examined before is a major omission in any critique of McCullers's works. As noted earlier, McCullers's claim that "everything that happens in my fiction has happened to me, or it will happen eventually" (Carr 105) is telling of her intentions in her writing. McCullers lived her life the way Frankie and Mick and the young narrator in "Like That" all hoped to one day live. She was a tomboy from a very young age and continued in her gender-bending ways into the final years of her life. Illness made it hard for her to be as physically adventurous as some of her young tomboy characters, but clearly the desire to see the world and move about with the freedom and ease that was not normally afforded to women in the middle of the twentieth century was present and something she pursued for as long as she was physically able.

McCullers's romantic interests are also mirrored in the desire she ascribed to her young queer characters. As painful as it was for her, it seems that McCullers was drawn to a sort of triangular love relationship, as noted by the editor of *Illuminations and Night Glare* (Dews xx), just as Frankie fell in love with the pairing of her brother and his

fiancée. McCullers clearly moved through her life aware of how others perceived her differences and the differences of those around her. Her challenge to the social categories whose stereotypes are still prevalent in our society today reveals a desire, on her part, to halt the sort of hate, fear and misunderstanding that often goes along to those people who are viewed as “others” in our society. The way that children and childhood are perceived in our society is not only harmfully limiting to them, it can also negatively impact us as adults as well. The fact that children do not have the same responsibilities and obligations that adults have does not mean that their lives are idyllic or simple, nor do their still growing bodies render them as being any less human than full-grown adults. Growth occurs in many ways for humans and it is ridiculous to think that once a person reaches a certain age, that the growth stops. McCullers uses love and desire to cut across some of the beliefs that have been designated to the categories of “adult” and “child”, as she describes the experience to be the same for members from both sides. As Jacqueline Rose rightly notes, the way we as adults perceive the child has less to do with the child itself and more to do with how we want to regard ourselves (Rose xii). However, anytime a person is viewed through the lens of a set of stereotypes, they automatically become objectified and, in a sense, dehumanized. McCullers does not allow for her readers to view her child characters in that way.

I once had a teacher in junior high school that, among other ridiculous things, made the claim that children were not capable of feeling deep human emotions like love and remorse; that their feelings were shallow and that they would only gradually gain the ability to feel after they went through puberty. Suffice it to say, this teacher also made fairly racist comments and demonstrated his personal beliefs by picking on certain

students and, in general, treating all of us as if we were less human than him. I can remember thinking at the time that either his claim was incredibly false or I was just a strange acceptance to this rule. I had loved by that age—I loved my family and had developed several strong crushes already—and I had also felt truly remorseful for some of the things that I had done that I knew were wrong or hurtful. The desire that I felt for some people when I was child does not seem so different to the sort of longing I have felt for the people I have been in romantic relationships with as an adult. It was, and still is, a desire to be close to someone, to feel like you belong to something, to feel accepted and to accept and incorporate the object of your love into your own life so that you, as a person, can grow. Children are more than capable of this and it is counterproductive to see them any other way.

This refusal in our society to view children as sexual beings has obvious implications to the way our society functions. “Abstinence Only” curriculums are still widely taught in parts of Canada and the United States, despite the fact that, according to statistics, this does nothing to actually stop children and teens from having sex—they are just less informed on how to have protected sex. It seems that when things are forbidden, they automatically become more desirable for many people. To deny that a child is sexual and refuse to teach them about their bodies and sexuality is to just make the sexuality into a confusing and wrong seeming thing to the child. How is this healthy for a child? How can we, as adults, deny feelings and desires to a child, when we ourselves must know how we felt when we were growing up? All that we are doing is leaving children misinformed, confused and ashamed for things that we consider to be perfectly normal and healthy for adults.

McCullers acknowledges the attitudes that are displayed in American society towards sex and children. In *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie is a witness to two boarders in her father's house having sexual intercourse in the front room. Despite the fact that Frankie has already begun puberty, no one has explained to her what sex is and how babies are made and such. Frankie can only assume that this man is "having a fit", though there is a part of her that knows there is more to this "fit" than what her father and Berenice are willing to tell her (70). Frankie's interest in sex is not directed towards men in a heteronormative fashion—Frankie's desires are more intellectual and she falls in love with people who share her ideas and world view, like Mary Littlejohn at the end of the novel. McCullers demonstrates in this novel and in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* that children, despite their lack of knowledge on certain matters, are aware and capable of having deep human emotions and connections. This is the main way that McCullers forces us to re-think how we conceive children and childhood in our society.

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