



Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences

Department of American Culture and Literature

**LONELINESS, ISOLATION AND SEXUALITY: THE  
PORTRAYAL OF ADOLESCENTS IN CARSON  
MCCULLERS' SHORT FICTION**

Ufuk TUTUCU

Master's Thesis

Ankara, 2018



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Bu alıřmadaki bütn bilgi ve belgeleri akademik kurallar erevesinde elde ettiđimi, grsel, iřitsel ve yazılı tm bilgi ve sonuları bilimsel ahlak kurallarına uygun olarak sunduđumu, kullandıđım verilerde herhangi bir tahrifat yapmadıđımı, yararlandıđım kaynaklara bilimsel normlara uygun olarak atıfta bulunduđumu, tezimin kaynak gsterilen durumlar dıřında zgn olduđunu, Do. Dr. Tanfer Emin Tun danıřmanlıđında tarafımdan retildiđini ve Hacettepe niversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstits Tez Yazım Ynergesine gre yazıldıđını beyan ederim.

  
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## ÖZET

TUTUCU, Ufuk. *Yalnızlık, Tecrit ve Cinsellik: Carson McCullers'in Öykülerinde Ergenlerin Betimlenmesi*, Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ankara, 2018.

Amerikan Güney Edebiyatı, 1920'li ve 1940'lı yıllarda dönemin yazarlarının Güney Gotiği adı verilen yeni bir edebi tarzda eserler yazmasıyla birlikte yeniden doğar. Bu yazarlar, Güney'in eski değerlerini altüst etmek için grotesk öğelerden yararlanırlar. Bu yazarlardan Carson McCullers'in kendine has Güney Gotiği tarzı, Güney toplumunun 1930'lardaki Büyük Buhran ve 1940'lardaki İkinci Dünya Savaşı dönemlerinin grotesk ergen karakterlerini ortaya çıkarır. McCullers, öykülerinde toplum tarafından dışlanmış, ötekileştirilmiş ve 20. yüzyılın ilk yarısına ait katı toplum kuralları tarafından çizilmiş sınırları aşan ergenlerin öykülerini anlatır.

Bu çerçevede, bu çalışma Queer kuramı kullanarak Carson McCullers'in altı öyküsünde—"The Haunted Boy" (1955), "Breath from the Sky" (1971), "Like That" (1971), "Wunderkind" (1936), "Court in the West Eighties" (1971), ve "The Orphanage" (1971)—bulunan grotesk çocuk, ergen ve aileleri, yalnızlık, tecrit ve cinsellik ifadelerine odaklanarak incelemektedir. Çalışmada, öykülerindeki karakterler ve gotik görünüşleri irdelenerek homoseksüellik, cinsiyetin dışavurumu (erkeksi kız, erkeksilik ve kadınsılık), cinsel uyanış, aidiyet/toplumda yer bulamama ve umursamazlık gibi konular üzerine McCullers'in anlayışı ve düşünceleri yansıtılmıştır.

Daha önce öykülerinde bahsetmiş olduğu ve üzerinde pek çalışılmamış olan bu karakterleri, McCullers'in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *The Member of the Wedding* ve *Clock Without Hands* gibi roman ve oyunlarında ortaya çıkan ergen karakterlerinin öncelleri olduğu için daha fazla irdelemek gerekmektedir. Tarihin bu çalkantılı ekonomik ve politik dönemi sırasında öykülerde yer alan ergen karakterler, McCullers'in Güney Gotiği objektifinden bakıp değerlendirdiği, değişen aile yapısı ve Amerikan toplumunu anlatan gerçek yaşantıların bir yansımasıdır.

### Anahtar Sözcükler

Öykü, Carson McCullers, Güney Gotiği, Grotesk, Ergenler, Queer Kuramı

## ABSTRACT

TUTUCU, Ufuk. *Loneliness, Isolation and Sexuality: The Portrayal of Adolescents in Carson McCullers' Short Fiction*, Master's Thesis, Ankara, 2018.

Southern literature underwent a renaissance between the 1920s and 40s when authors of the era created works in a new literary mode called Southern Gothic and used grotesque elements to dismantle the idols and values of the Old South. Carson McCullers was one of them and her Southern Gothic style created a number of grotesque characters, many of whom were adolescents, who became the embodiment of southern society as it existed during the Great Depression in the 1930s and the Second World War in the 1940s. She told the stories of these socially-excluded children and ostracized teenagers who transgressed boundaries defined by the rigid social conventions in her short fiction.

Using a queer theory framework, this thesis will analyze the grotesque children, adolescents, and families found in six of Carson McCullers's short stories—"The Haunted Boy" (1955), "Breath from the Sky" (1971), "Like That" (1971), "Wunderkind" (1936), "Court in the West Eighties" (1971), and "The Orphanage" (1971)—with a special focus on expressions of loneliness, isolation, and sexuality. By examining these characters and their gothic manifestations, more insight can be gained into McCullers's thoughts on the crucial issues of her time, especially (homo)sexuality, gender expression (tomboys, masculinity, and femininity), sexual awakening, (dis)placement, and apathy.

Analyzing these understudied characters is particularly important because they serve as significant forerunners to her later adolescent characters found in novels and plays such as *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *The Member of the Wedding* and *Clock Without Hands*. Moreover, the adolescent characters in her short stories provide us with a window into American society, and especially the changing nature of the family unit, during the Great Depression and Second World War eras, which McCullers evaluates and critiques through a Southern Gothic lens.

### Keywords

Short story, Carson McCullers, Southern Gothic, Grotesque, Adolescents, Queer Theory

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## INTRODUCTION

In his work introducing the American author Carson McCullers (1917–1967), Lawrence Graver states that “it is appropriate that the simple facts of her life should evoke both wonder and melancholy” (5). That is to say, her life was most intriguing. This might be one reason why today, her interviews and incomplete autobiography are as popular as her twenty short stories, novella, four novels and two plays.

In *It's Good Weather for Fudge*, Sue Walker remarks that prior to her birth, Lula Carson Smith's mother expected her to be a boy genius. Being born a baby girl wrecked her mother's dreams. Her mother loved her, but was obsessive about little Carson being special. At a very young age, her mother forced her to learn how to play the piano and initially, Carson was pleased with the attention she was getting from her mother as a musical prodigy or “wunderkind.” However, once her baby sister was born, Carson became irritated by the fact that Bonny attracted all her mother's attention (69-70).

Walker adds that thanks to her musical talent, McCullers was able to get out of Columbus, Georgia, which she found smothering, and had broadened her horizons not through a musical education, but one in writing. By the time she died of a brain hemorrhage at the age of fifty—her health was deteriorating due to chronic illness, including strokes, rheumatic fever and breast cancer as an adolescent—she had become a prominent writer who narrated the American South with a true-pitched realism (70-72). As this thesis will argue, her Southern Gothic style created a number of grotesque characters, many of whom were adolescents, who became the embodiment of southern society as it existed during the Great Depression in the 1930s and the Second World War in the 1940s. McCullers told the stories of these socially-excluded children and ostracized teenagers in her short fiction, which will be the focus of this thesis. Much like the author herself, these young outcasts were loners and lonely, but never lost their ambition, especially to hold on to life. She exposed their queer sides—and perhaps her own—as they transgressed boundaries defined by the rigid social conventions of the first half of the twentieth-century.

While McCullers's writing encourages tolerance towards people with different backgrounds and abilities, it also voices the struggles of men and women, and boys and girls, of all ages and their power to alter the traditions oppressing them. It reminds readers of the importance of empathy and acceptance, and the danger of labelling difference as "abnormal." She emphasizes the supremacy of democracy in our world while critiquing all kinds of discrimination, brutality and bullying. As this thesis will illustrate, McCullers is more than a Modernist Southern Gothic author. As long as there are children and adolescents dealing with issues of acceptance and belonging, she will remain a relevant "contemporary" writer.

## **THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC**

Traditional southern literature (c. 1800–1860), and its post-Civil War successor, "Lost Cause" literature, is mainly characterized by its glorification of the mythical Old South. It consists of the imagery of white columned mansions, large plantations, masters, chivalrous gentlemen, preachers, beautiful and innocent southern belles, and slaves. Lost Cause literature, which spans the era between the end of the Civil War (1865) and the First World War (1918) also romanticizes the South through strong ties to family, community, place, memory, the tragic history of defeat in the Civil War, the "horrors" of Reconstruction, and a glorification of the Ku Klux Klan. It praises and provides readers with a rejuvenation of the old gendered chivalric code, the universal value of honor, and gentleness with subordinates (i.e., African Americans and poor whites). It also portrays Northerners as people who manipulate and take advantage of Southerners as carpetbaggers who collaborate with scalawags, and in terms of issues of sex, race and class, prioritizes the worldview of white elite men (Tunç, "Recuperating, Re-membering and Resurrecting" 181-183).

Southern literature underwent a renaissance between the 1920s and 40s when authors such as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Eudora Welty, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams and Carson McCullers created works in a new literary mode called Southern Gothic and used grotesque elements to subvert the idols and values of the Old South. Southern Gothic was both a form of southern Modernism as well as part of the new American Gothic that emerged during the interwar years. These authors extended

the work of nineteenth-century gothic writers such as Charles Brockden Brown, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and Washington Irving and challenged European gothic tropes. According to Richard Davenport-Hines, the author of *Gothic: Four Hundred Years of Excess, Horror, Evil and Ruin*, the gothic is pessimistic and anti-progression, which is at odds with American culture which is Puritan, optimistic, and in favor of progression. Davenport-Hines defines European gothic as untamed, denying safety and security. Characters of European gothic are ostracized from family life and their main goal is to destroy it. On the other hand, American gothic centralizes the family, while also illustrating it as a destructive power (314). In his first novel *Wieland* (1798), the pioneer of American gothic, Charles Brockden Brown (1771–1810) focuses on the destruction of a family, as well as spiritual corruption, subordination, and defeat—themes that were later developed by American Dark Romantics (e.g., Nathaniel Hawthorne in “The Birth Mark,” “The Minister’s Black Veil,” *The Scarlet Letter*, and *House of the Seven Gables*; Edgar Allan Poe with short stories such as “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”; and Washington Irving with “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”) who helped establish this genre of writing in the United States (Davenport-Hines 324-350).

Southern Gothic authors use the concept of family in their works mostly as a lacking, insufficient part of their characters. In fact, most characters’ problems stem from family issues. In Southern Gothic, a wife who mourns for the loss of her husband may become insane, or a son can become delirious, even suicidal, due to maternal distancing. Southern Gothic is replete with abandoned children, orphans, angst-filled adolescents, divorced and estranged couples, loveless relationships, unrequited love, loneliness, violence, depression, alienation, isolation, sexual repression and a whole host of other mental and physical disorders that find their origins in the family specifically, and the troubled past of the South in general (Davenport-Hines 350-355).

Ellen Glasgow is said to have coined the term “Southern Gothic School” in her article entitled “Heroes and Monsters,” which was published in *Saturday Review* in 1935 (Bailey 270; Palmer 120). Glasgow, however, criticizes the unrealistic treatment Faulkner and Caldwell employ in their works and the “aimless violence” of their characters (Bailey 270). Glasgow saw the genre as “irresponsible, crude, childishly

morbid, and akin to fairy tales” and, the Southern Gothic “blur[red] boundaries and [was] a betrayal of both the realist tradition and the traditional Gothic” (qtd. in Palmer 120). All Glasgow wanted the Southern Gothic writer “to do [was] to deal as honestly with living tissue as he now deals with decay, to remind himself that the colors of putrescence have no greater validity for our age, [or] for any age” (qtd. in Palmer 120). According to Glasgow, Southern Gothic writers practiced “literary miscegenation” by combining “pseudo-realism” and European gothic (qtd. in Bailey 270).

Glasgow’s criticism of the “Southern Gothic School” was followed by favorable attention from other critics and writers, such as Eudora Welty, who helped recuperate the genre and expand it into the area of the grotesque, or a condemnation of the degenerate ways of the South, not southerners themselves (Marshall 3). Marshall also clarified the larger project of Southern Gothic as an offshoot of American Gothic, which was based on European Gothic and its use of dark settings such as scary castles and ruined churches; dead, old, or sickly people; and the monstrous as seen in works like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Robert Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (4-7). Southern Gothic replaces these figures with those that fit southern culture and its context. Marshall states that instead of deploying haunted medieval castles, Southern Gothic focuses on decaying plantations to symbolize a rotting social system, the racist burden of the past (slavery) on the present, class issues, and a “fallen aristocracy” (7). As elements of European gothic were replaced with southern ones, a new mode of writing appeared, deploying “portrayals of more general Southern cultural anxieties: apprehension about race, denial, and recovery of historical horrors and disgrace, and grief over cultural or personal loss” (Marshall 15–16). Southern Gothic thus offers readers a world in which southern myths, stereotypes and nostalgia are being subverted and exposed to criticism. Moreover, Southern Gothic modifies the dichotomies of the past and uses them to distance and alienate the reader, who, in turn, is compelled to question the past and its values. In other words, binary oppositions like the aristocracy/upper class and yeoman farmers/lower class, or good/sexually innocent and bad/sexually experienced are dismantled in the gothic mode, suddenly rendering characters accessible due to their flaws, which have now been exposed (Tunç, “Sexuality, Insanity, and the Old South” 153).



John M. Bradbury categorizes Carson McCullers as a “second generation” Southern Gothic writer who, along with Eudora Welty, Robert Ramsey, Edward Kimbrough and Jane Morton drew inspiration from Faulkner and Katherine Anne Porter, especially in terms of language, technique and subject matter (105). McCullers, like most of these writers, focuses mainly on human isolation and loneliness. Most importantly, her characters are unable to overcome these situations due to a lack of love, compassion, and understanding from society. She plays with concepts such as homosexuality, homosocial bonding, androgyny, tomboyism, sexual awakening, masculinity, femininity, reproduction, and class and racial oppression as a means to make sense of the lives of the misfits and outcasts she depicts in her works.

In the essay “The Russian Realists and Southern Literature,” which was published in *The Mortgaged Heart*, McCullers contends that in the Southern Gothic “School,” “romantic” and “supernatural” elements are eclipsed by “a peculiar and intense realism.” Thus, McCullers believes that her prose offers a more realistic perspective to the traditional European “Gothic School,” even though it evokes “horror, beauty and emotional ambivalence” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 252). She also connects Southern Gothic literature to Russian realism through common themes, such as the “cheapness of human life,” as found in the works of Gogol, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, adding a dimension of legitimacy to what was a new genre in the interwar years (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 252). In short, McCullers saw Southern Gothic as “a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of a man with a materialistic detail” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 253).

## **GROTESQUE CHILDREN AND QUEER ADOLESCENTS**

In his article entitled “Carson McCullers: The Aesthetic of Pain,” critic Louis D. Rubin, Jr. characterizes McCullers’s work in the following terms:

The McCullers fiction, I believe, has at its center a fundamental premise: which is that solitude—loneliness—is a human constant, and cannot possibly be alleviated for very long at a time. But there is no philosophical acceptance of that condition, and none of the joy in it that one finds in, say, Thomas Wolfe or even Hemingway. The

solitude is inevitable, and it is always painful. Thus life is a matter of living in pain, and art is the portrayal of anguish. (115)

As Rubin suggests, McCullers's fiction, especially her short fiction, offers a slice of life in which human psychology is terribly wrecked and always pessimistic. While she is not a good representative of "historical tradition or community identification" like writers such as Faulkner and Welty (Rubin, Jr. 113), her works are culturally and geographically grounded in the South, and thus implicitly depicts its history and community. While she does not use actual events in her short fiction, the "cheapness of life" she portrays could have realistically occurred anywhere in the South.

Another factor that distinguishes McCullers as a Southern Gothic writer, which will be the focus of this thesis, is her handling of grotesque child and adolescent characters. In particular, she highlights their queer behaviors either directly or indirectly (as subtext), inevitably creating character portraits that are unmistakably Southern Gothic.

Grotesqueness is a familiar concept, yet not one with which most individuals automatically identify. It appears in many forms of art and architecture, and has been a motif in literature since antiquity. It creates a sense of distance as well as feelings of fear and humor. It also represents an enormous range of emotions, often simultaneously, such as disgust, strangeness, aloofness, repulsiveness, agony, wickedness, and distortedness. As a result, there is no single definition for the grotesque. As Wolfgang Iser states, "the grotesque portrays a world of violence and fear" (qtd. in Gleason-White, "Revisiting" 110)—a common explanation of the grotesque and one echoed in Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais*: the grotesque "expresses not the fear of death but the fear of life" (50). This idea is frequently encountered in McCullers' works, especially when she emphasizes the "cheapness of human life." Violence and fear surface as a consequence of the monstrous side of grotesque characters who often torment, fight, kill and even mutilate others or themselves, while usually deriving some sort of sadistic or masochistic pleasure from it.

Furthermore, Alan Spiegel in "A Theory of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction" states that grotesque characters often suffer from bodily or psychological defects (428). Such defects are symbolic embodiments of uncanny and repugnant aspects of human nature like war and mental illness. Malformed bodies not only evoke sympathy and empathy,

but in conjunction with an unsettled personality, this expression of the grotesque may represent various sexual formations, as Gleeson-White suggests (“Revisiting” 111). This feature is reflected in McCullers’s adolescent characters. Her novels and plays are full of bodily-deformed figures; her short stories include non-heteronormative adolescent characters who are either tomboys or sexually suppressed female grotesques. There are also voyeurs and those who take pleasure in pain, adding to the wide-range of grotesqueness in her short fiction.

The definition of grotesqueness also involves being an outcast. Grotesque characters fail to conform to the society of which they are a part, in every way imaginable. They are mostly alienated and isolated individuals, and thus lonely loners who seek each other for comfort. As Mab Segrest expresses in “Southern Women Writing: Toward a Literature of Wholeness,” “Both patriarchy and racism depend on creating a category of the Other—or freak, not ‘normal like me.’ In southern racism, it is the black person; in patriarchy, the female” (27). In McCullers’s work, women in particular are “freaks” for they defy the traditions and gender codes of the South on numerous levels—especially physically, sexually, and behaviorally.

With its emphasis on grotesqueness, physical and mental illness, haunted dwellings, corruption, racism, sexism and alienation, Southern Gothic literature highlights the realities of the Old and New South, calling for a reevaluation of this binary in the process. Carson McCullers contributes to these concepts by depicting young marginalized characters with queer behaviors and various “abnormalities,” and asking for readers’ sympathy, understanding and recognition. Her adolescent characters, in particular, attempt to destroy systems of conduct with their subversive behavior and thereby criticize the corrupt social and moral orders. In this respect, Southern Gothic is both a progressive and transgressive literary mode. It is not fantasy, ghouls and gore as the gothic has become today, but realism that is at times exaggerated for impact and effect. For McCullers, Southern Gothic is ultimately about the rawness of human emotions.

Clearly, McCullers’ dissatisfaction with the heinousness of life surfaces in her adolescent characters through grotesquery. A lack of affection often manifests itself as detachment from social life or family life, and attention-deprived characters who cannot

fill the void turn into outlaws who challenge the rules of decorum. The more emotionally-twisted, hideous, queer and grotesque they become, the more they bend social conventions and expectations. The pain of a loveless life catalyzes transformation, which usually results in a criticism of southern society.

In her essay “The Vision Shared,” McCullers emphasizes how her grotesque characters are taken from real life and therefore can only be associated with reality. As she explains,

Any form of art can only develop by means of single mutations by individual creators. If only traditional conventions are used an art will die, and the widening of an art form is bound to seem strange at first, and awkward. Any growing thing must go through awkward stages. The creator who is misunderstood because of his breach of convention may say to himself, “I seem strange to you, but anyway I am alive.” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 264)

Thus for McCullers, the grotesque is like a mirror, reflecting society’s complicated, and often bigoted, conventions and calling for their acknowledgement and revision. It complements Tennessee Williams’s definition in which the grotesque emphasizes the real by offering a fresh perspective through disturbing scenes (Bray 85). As Williams conveyed in an interview, “Sometimes the truth is more accessible when you ignore realism, because when you see things in a somewhat exaggerated form you capture more of the true essence of life. The exaggeration gets closer to the essence. This essence of life is really very grotesque and gothic. To get to it you’ve got to do what may strike some people as distortion” (qtd. in Brown 264). Thus the grotesque is an indispensable part of the Southern Gothic writer’s toolbox.

Queer theory is arguably the best framework through which to interpret McCullers’s short fiction as it explains many aspects of the Southern Gothic, especially its non-heteronormative, grotesque and subversive qualities. Her adolescent characters, who symbolize the displaced, marginalized and ostracized youth of America, hope for change through the destruction of socially constructed norms, which is also at the heart of the queer project. Although queer theory is a postmodern means of reading sex, sexuality, gender and the body, as Mimi Marinucci states in *Feminism is Queer* (38), it can still be utilized to comment on McCullers’ work. Her short fiction definitely seems to aim for the “normalization of the abnormal” to the point of destroying binaries, which

is exactly the kind of work in which three of the founding theorists of queer theory—Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michel Foucault—engage.

As Marinucci states, such binaries are built on the boundaries set between male and female, masculine and feminine, and homosexual and heterosexual (34). Queer theory disruptively argues that these oppositions are established by social and cultural norms and are therefore always artificial, especially since they promote a normativity that is a copy for which there is no original (simulacrum). Queer theory raises awareness about the fact that all binary limitations are social and cultural products meant to normalize, discipline and punish the “abnormal” (Marinucci 33–34). In other words, they are all about power and the struggle between the powerful (white, heterosexual, able-bodied, gender-conforming adult male) and the powerless or queer (everyone else). Even though queer theory’s main goal is to decompose dualistic oppositions of gender, sex, and pleasure, clearly it is not restricted to these concepts. Queer refers to anything, any situation, or anyone that does not fit into socially-constructed codes or regulations, thus sharing many similarities with the Southern Gothic.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler reflects upon Simone de Beauvoir’s famous claim that “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (1) to analyze how the functionality of the female body and its associated gender roles are preset by men. In short, her main aim is to displace the binary system much like Foucault, who defies social regulations established on sex and desire. On the other hand, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick expands this project by claiming that the binaries in need of deconstruction should not be restricted to those associated with male and female and homosexuality and heterosexuality, but also “secrecy/disclosure, knowledge/ignorance, private/public, masculine/feminine, majority/minority, innocence/initiation, natural/artificial, new/old, discipline/terrorism, canonic/noncanonic, wholeness/decadence, urbane/provincial, domestic/foreign, health/illness, same/different, active/passive, in/out, cognition/paranoia, art/kitsch, utopia/apocalypse, sincerity/sentimentality, and voluntary/addiction” (11). In other words, the binaries that govern the worlds of McCullers’s Southern Gothic child and adolescent characters.

Abjection is another key concept that will also inform the analytic framework of this thesis. According to Calvin Thomas, the term abjection has two different meanings for

Judith Butler and Julia Kristeva. Although both definitions are utilized in queer theory, their perspectives are quite different from each other. Butler regards the concept in its literal sense. As abjection means “cast off” in Latin (xii), she interprets the idea as symbolizing an act of defiance against an oppressive social system. On the other hand, Kristeva relates the idea to the body, and in particular to undesirable or grotesque substances like “blood, mucus, saliva, milk, urine, feces, [and] tears” (Thomas xii). Moreover, Kristeva includes within her definition of abjection feeling like all of the above, which is precisely how McCullers’s young isolated pariahs perceive themselves and their lives.

### **REBELLING, DEFYING AND TRANSGRESSING**

Half a century ago we used to say in America that the great and abiding theme of our literature was the theme of innocence. Today, after fifty full years of strange history, we find it easier to claim that America has at last come of age, that it has, in fact, reached an end to innocence ... One of the consequences of this transition from innocence to experience is the cult of adolescence in modern literature. (Hassan, “The Idea” 312)

This is how Ihab Hassan began his article “The Idea of Adolescence in American Fiction,” which was published in the *American Quarterly* in 1958. However in many ways, it could have just as easily been written in 2018. According to Hassan, the present and the future are built on the past, which is basically symbolized by an adolescence that also reflects morality and imagination (“The Idea” 312). In other words, adolescence was, and still is, a transitional phase or journey that takes children from their responsibility-free world to the responsible world of adulthood. In that sense, it is a “process of initiation,” “adjustment,” and “renunciation” (“The Idea” 314). As Hassan expresses, the cult of adolescence is a representation of the American Dream, which is built on “the vision of youth and hope.” Thus in every attempt to create a dramatically exposed adolescent character, authors also question the viability of the American Dream (“The Idea” 313–317). In the context of McCullers’s oeuvre, adolescent characters symbolize America’s and more specifically the South’s endeavor to adapt to shifting social conditions. Hassan believes that this innocence was first lost during the Civil War (“The Idea” 315) and that since then, the portrayal of adolescents, particularly in *bildungsroman*, has changed along with the changing nation.

James W. Johnson suggests that the numerous adolescent characters in modern American literature, such as Huckleberry Finn, Daisy Miller, Clyde Griffiths and Nick Adams (4), helped create “the adolescent myth” which assesses life as an unknown future. This idea is pessimistic in the sense that these characters are usually regarded as “lost between some vanished pattern of values and an unknown future,” living lives that are often “chaotic.” According to Johnson, the adolescent character is easily and profoundly influenced by his environment, and is always internally conflicted (10).

As Johnson states, another common trait among adolescent characters is a feeling of loss. Adolescent heroes and heroines usually suffer from the deep emotions associated with traumatic events. These emotions haunt them in a vicious cycle from which they are always trying to escape (6). “[T]he element of sexual confusion” which Johnson defines as being “an interesting facet of [the] depiction of physical adolescence” is another common trait (6). Loneliness and isolation are also included on the list because they often result from an adolescent’s bodily self-consciousness or as a consequence of attempting to escape oppression. Familial conflict is likewise among the reasons of isolation, and Johnson even compares adolescent heroes and heroines to “aliens,” or strangers in strange lands, at this stage of their lives (7). In short, the qualities outlined by Hassan and Johnson are, as this thesis will illustrate, guiding characteristics of McCullers’s youth-oriented short fiction.

In many ways, adolescents are perpetual freaks because they are “uninitiated,” liminal and therefore “forever unacceptable.” They represent the conflict between “the self and the world,” a clash that helps McCullers narrate the alienation her characters endure in an unaccepting and unforgiving world. According to Hassan, this complements the “thematic juxtaposition of the power of love and the presence of pain in the vision of Carson McCullers” (*Radical* 209). Moreover, as Richard M. Cook hypothesizes, the reason McCullers places adolescents and children at the center of her novels and short stories may be out of the desire to use them as vehicles to reflect her own unfulfilled dreams—the “frustrations and disappointments,” especially with respect to music, lingering from her childhood (2). Virginia Spencer Carr’s biographical works on McCullers, *Understanding Carson McCullers* and *The Lonely Hunter*, certainly reinforce Cook’s observation by pointing out the connections between McCullers’s

personal life and her fiction. However, while McCullers's work is undeniably full of autobiographical allusions and are, as Carr notes, worthy of study, especially in terms of the depth they add to her characters, they fall outside the scope of this thesis whose primary goal is to examine McCullers's short fiction through a queer Southern Gothic lens.

Nevertheless, McCullers values personal experience, especially from childhood, as part of the writing process. As she expresses, in "The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing," "Many authors find it hard to write about new environments that they did not know in childhood. The voices reheard from childhood have a truer pitch. And the foliage—the trees of childhood—are remembered more exactly" (*Mortgaged* 279). Perhaps, as Hassan notes, this is why American authors "looking back to their own boyhood write as if the adolescent knew the answer" to the failure of the American Dream ("The Idea" 318).

McCullers's emphasis on childhood and adolescence, however, goes far deeper than the resolution of personal issues. For her, they are the ideal way to resist the oppressive binaries of the South. After World War II, the adolescent, or teenager, emerged as a demographic group, with an identity and spending power that could be targeted by marketers. Rebels without a cause, they "celebrated the lonely, the freakish, the simple and [the] delicate," and thrived on the clash between "the self and the world" (Hassan, "The Idea" 313). McCullers's anguished portrayal of the adolescent initiation process included all of these elements, rendering her characters reflections of their era. Consequently, as Cook suggests, a perennial theme in McCullers's work is "the self's changing identity in time," as seen through the adolescent protagonists in the novels *The Member of the Wedding* and *Clock Without Hands* (106).

In *Clock Without Hands*, Jester, the adolescent with a strange personality, is able to find himself by finding his father (Cook 115). Jester is not like the rest of the characters McCullers creates for according to Cook, "[h]e is that rare person in McCullers's world whose search for self ends in integration not alienation" (116). Just like Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*, Jester is an outsider who strives to rid himself of feelings of loneliness and abandonment. He matures once he finds his father; all his ghosts disappear once he establishes a family to which he can belong, which is exactly what



Frankie is trying to accomplish in *The Member of the Wedding*. This surely indicates that for McCullers, family is essential to the stability of adolescents.

Using a queer theory framework, this thesis will analyze the grotesque children, adolescents, and families found in six of Carson McCullers's Southern Gothic short stories—"The Haunted Boy," "Breath from the Sky," "Like That," "Wunderkind," "Court in the West Eighties," and "The Orphanage"—with a special focus on expressions of loneliness, isolation, and sexuality. I contend that by examining these characters and their gothic manifestations, more insight can be gained into McCullers's thoughts on the crucial issues of her time, especially (homo)sexuality, gender expression (tomboys, masculinity, and femininity), sexual awakening, (dis)placement, and apathy. Analyzing these understudied characters is particularly important because they serve as significant precursors to her later adolescent characters found in novels and plays such as *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *The Member of the Wedding* and *Clock Without Hands*. Moreover, the adolescent characters in her short stories provide us with a window into American society, and especially the changing nature of the family unit, during the Great Depression and Second World War eras, which McCullers evaluates and critiques through a Southern Gothic lens.

"The Haunted Boy" (1955) narrates the story of Hugh, an emotionally-wounded adolescent boy living with the fear that one day he will return from school and find his mother dead. She attempted suicide after a series of medical problems, and Hugh has never recovered from discovering her, with her wrists slit, in a pool of blood. Hugh believes that his mother's visit to a state mental hospital for recovery represents a desire to abandon him; thus he cannot come to terms with her illness and subsequent behavior. Hugh turns to his friend John for comfort, yet John is quite indifferent and insensitive towards Hugh's needs. The story includes suppressed feelings, love-hate relationships, fear of abandonment and loneliness, the changing definition of masculinity in post-WWII America, abjection and (homo)sexuality, all of which are expressed through the gothic elements (blood, suicide, locked doors, insanity) that burden the adolescent boy.

"Breath from the Sky" (1971) is about Constance, an adolescent character who, due to a tuberculosis diagnosis, is on the verge of being dispatched to a sanitarium in Georgia. Constance's fear of never returning home convinces her that her siblings and mother

will forget her. However, her mother's seemingly indifferent attitude actually stems from confusion over how to handle what realistically amounted to, at that time, a dying daughter. Abandonment, isolation, abjection and dysfunctionality are motifs in "Breath from the Sky," embroidered with a memorable use of color imagism. In this case, Constance's mother is another example of how McCullers' blames adolescent problems on weak parenting and disintegrating familial emotional ties.

The third short story analyzed in this thesis is "Like That" (1971). This is a story of a thirteen-year-old adolescent girl who rebels against the idea of growing up. The story consists mainly of an inner speech about her older sister's initiation. However, in essence, the story represents the social and cultural initiation of the narrator. She resents what growing up has meant to her life and feels extremely nostalgic about what she used to share with her brother and sister. She expresses pain and anger over her sister's menstruation, which represents the end of childhood and the beginning of adulthood and its sexual and reproductive concerns. Later in the story, the narrator also describes how her sister's first sexual experience changes both of them. The relationship between the narrator and Sis worsens as Sis distances herself from the narrator. The narrator's feelings of angst, hostility, alienation, loneliness, and her father's indifference increase with her sister's sexual awakening. McCullers portrays the adolescent protagonist as an archetypal tomboy, which adds a deeper feminist meaning to the story in terms of transgressive women being outlaws who challenge social rules.

Frances in "Wunderkind" (1936) is an adolescent who feels unprepared for the adult world. The story uses the initiation theme to narrate the adolescent protagonist's love for music and her piano teacher, Mr. Bilderbach, and how she abandons both. Through the use of music as a motif, McCullers depicts Frances's discovery of her sexuality as the ultimate "crescendo." Her desire to please her teacher by playing the piano well demonstrates Frances's grotesque nature, in particular her linking of music to sexuality. The relationship she has with her Jewish piano teacher also helps her to realize her position as a woman and how sophisticated, distorted and decayed familial bonds are in American society. By the end of the short story, Frances is disappointed, but initiated.

"The Orphanage" (1971) is likewise an initiation story set during the Great Depression involving a girl and her adolescent journey into sexuality, reproduction (involving a

grotesque “dead pickled baby”), and southern sexism and racism through Hattie, her initiator. “The Orphanage” includes gothic and grotesque imagery and is mostly built on the narrator’s attempts, as a jealous outsider, to understand the orphans and their bonding. The character is obviously frustrated due to the fact that she is excluded from the group. She frantically desires belonging, which is a recurring theme in McCullers’s writing (i.e., *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*). She is quite curious about the mysterious orphans and when she is eventually able to interact with them, she becomes even more confounded by their broad and inclusive definition of “family.” Isolated and lonely, the orphans seem better adjusted than the narrator, suggesting that McCullers is indeed questioning and redefining the meaning of family in this short story.

“Court in the West Eighties” (1971) is the story of an eighteen-year-old university student who observes her neighbors through the disturbingly close window of an apartment building. She witnesses many acts of violence, particularly domestic abuse, throughout the story and believes that one of her neighbors, the man with red hair, can actually help eliminate it. However, what she eventually realizes is that in the end, our ability to intervene in others’ lives is limited, and that everyone must bear his/her own suffering. Written in the early 1930s, the story is set against the backdrop of the Great Depression, which is highlighted by McCullers’ emphasis on poverty, loneliness and violence.

Besides being a well-known novelist, Carson McCullers also wrote outstanding works of short fiction. However, her stories remain understudied and neglected. While there are many articles, books, and dissertations written on her novels, especially those examining gothic elements and themes, few exist on her short fiction. Thus, this thesis will shed light on Carson McCullers’s short fiction both as works of queer Southern Gothic and as windows into her novels and other writing.

## CHAPTER 1: UNVEILING QUEER ELEMENTS IN “THE HAUNTED BOY” AND “BREATH FROM THE SKY”

In *New American Gothic*, Irving Malin lists shared characteristics in the works of Truman Capote and Carson McCullers, and gathers them under three headings, one of which is “the Family.” He focuses on the idea that new American Gothic plays with the concept of family, which is usually considered “a stable unit,” but instead is destroyed in the works of these two authors (50). Malin states that the young members of the family are seen as unmolded characters who are in search of identity and attention, and that the family is full of “terror” and chaos (8). The family is not a rock of stability, “togetherness” or solidarity; it is undependable, confusing and destructive. The idea of family is shattered in Southern Gothic. Despite the fact that characters try to escape dysfunction by looking for “surrogate-figures,” their efforts almost always lead back to the unstable family (50).

The family figures in McCullers’s short fiction tend to be incomplete, failing to support a feeling of communion. The parenting style that McCullers portrays is always problematic for the adolescent character(s) because it represents loss and void and not comfort and completion. McCullers’s characters often lack one or both parents, which usually compounds the adolescent’s problems. Adolescents, like those in “The Haunted Boy” and “Breath from the Sky,” are forced to find their way out of perplexing situations through early maturation, which is accompanied by unavoidable consequences.

McCullers presents alcoholism, disease, abandonment, domestic violence, and a lack of interest in one’s children as ways of dismantling the family myth in the American literary tradition. Southern Gothic families have a destructive power over their members, which leads to feelings of exclusion, isolation, loneliness, abandonment and loss. Tragic love triangles may even surface as a survival mechanism, for in a sense they create relationships that characters can, at least temporarily, substitute for their families. These “grotesque” bonds between characters also queer McCullers’s works, exposing them to multiple levels of interpretation.

“The Haunted Boy” and “Breath from the Sky” share a number of mutual themes and motifs, including those dealing with disease and love. The stories narrate the extreme love of adolescents Hugh and Constance for their mothers. The absence of a father figure is quite obvious in both stories and as a result, the adolescent characters search for outside elements to complete their lives. Moreover, at an early age, both learn about the “cheapness of life” through illness, and suffer from emotional deficiencies, including a lack of affection and attention from their mothers.

The main themes in McCullers’s writing—abandonment, loneliness and isolation—are clearly apparent in these stories, and are reinforced through her gothic writing style. Hugh and Constance are arguably two of her most grotesque characters because they suffer from an indescribable loneliness that catalyzes their peculiar behavior. While these characters may look physically “normal” on the outside, as Robert Phillips notes, they are grotesque because they are twisted on the inside (172–173). Feelings of abandonment and abjection come to dominate their lives, adding to the dysfunction that already exists in their families, especially in terms of their relationships to their mothers.

### **1.1. “THE HAUNTED BOY”**

“The Haunted Boy” begins when Hugh and one of his friends, John, decide to go to Hugh’s house after school. Hugh is clearly worried about something, yet it is not palpable in the beginning. What is obvious is that he expects his mother to be at home, but she is not. The two boys spend time eating and drinking in an uncomfortable, tense way, while Hugh continues to look for his mother. Hugh talks about her constantly in an attempt to displace his fears; yet, she is clearly not at home and John becomes doubtful as to whether she is okay. In need of John’s support, Hugh explains that his mother spent time at a mental institution in Milledgeville, Georgia because she was “blue.” She was expecting a child, which instead turned out to be a tumor. As a result, she underwent a hysterectomy which led to early menopause and depression. However, the reality is much darker.

Hugh constantly tries to lead John upstairs because the real reason Hugh’s mother went to Milledgeville was much more complicated. She was not merely “blue”: she once

tried to commit suicide by slashing her wrists in the bath tub. Feeling uneasy, John refuses to leave the kitchen and starts making up excuses about chores and other “obligations” to leave as soon as possible. However, Hugh clearly has other obligations. As his mother’s caretaker, he has become a substitute husband/father and must locate her at whatever cost. When John leaves, Hugh knows he has to check the bathroom alone, without the support of his friend. All of a sudden he remembers the “the other time” when he discovered his mother in a ghoulish pool of blood, and how he had to save her and call for help like “a brave little man,” without shedding a tear.

As he creeps up the stairs, Hugh remembers all the pain, chaos, dread, and exclusion that he experienced, without the benefit of emotional release. Seeing the bathroom empty brings about a cathartic moment of relief through crying, but it is cut short when his mother returns home from a shopping trip. Like an angry parent, Hugh scolds his mother for not letting him know about her plans. She, in effect, becomes the child while he assumes a paternal persona. She starts showing Hugh what she has purchased and alarmingly the clothes she has bought make her look like a little girl. “Her flat-heeled shoes” with “diamond sparkles on the toes” look absurd, and Hugh fears that his mother might be losing her mind. This feeling of dread is amplified when she dances in the “pretty dress” which makes her seem like someone who is “trying to seem young” (McCullers, *Collected* 168). The pressure of this role reversal results in a confrontation between Hugh and his absent father who, acknowledging his lack of parenting skills, praises him for all his courage during this difficult time and for basically functioning in a dysfunctional family. Hugh emerges with a heightened sense of maturity, but this does not compensate for, or cure, his feelings of loneliness, abandonment and isolation.

Hugh is clearly a “haunted boy” who is constantly stalked by the ghosts of “the other time,” which appear as cold, bloody flashbacks saturated in red and dark shadows, even on this spring afternoon. He craves his mother’s love and attention and yearns to have an oddly close relationship with her that borders on the oedipal. He finds his mother’s affection insufficient and feeling unfulfilled, he searches for completion in other ways; namely, through a homoerotic relationship with John, an older (sixteen-year-old) idol whom he constantly praises and to whom he even recites poetry (Hugh’s nickname is Shelley-Poe reinforcing the gothic and poetic elements of the short story). Hugh also

lacks paternal love and does not, as a young fourteen-year-old man who is entering adulthood, have a father figure on whom he can depend in times of need.

Despite his internal disorder, from the outside, Hugh lives in an orderly household. The entrance to his house is filled with flowers such as candytuft, lobelias and sweet William. There are also fresh flowers on the table, and he is sure that his mother “has [made him] something nice after school,” such as pie (McCullers, *Collected* 160). The emphasis on cleanliness, mom and apple pie creates a sense of uncanny normalcy. The stairs smell like varnish and the bathroom tiles are “clean,” suggesting that everything is fresh and well-kept. Hugh’s mother, we are to believe, is a very 1950s good “housewife,” skilled in both gardening and cooking. The tidy house is clearly in contrast with the internal chaos from which Hugh suffers. It also trivializes his anguish, rendering it insignificant, exaggerated and perhaps even fabricated.

Hugh is extremely nervous talking about his mother’s situation with others, even his father. “[T]hose intimacies had been rare, oblique” (McCullers, *Collected* 161) because his father is busy working and paying the hospital bills, and is rarely at home. This prevents any kind of meaningful bonding. In fact, his father seems aloof and clueless about what is happening in his own household. At the end of the short story he asks Hugh why he is so nervous, oblivious to the trauma that his son has just experienced through the shopping incident. His empty words of “manly” praise merely indicate the distance between them and how he does not know his son at all: “I just want you to know that I realize how fine you were all that bad time. How fine, how damn fine” (McCullers, *Collected* 170).

As a matter of fact, Hugh has never been fine. He is trapped in a haunted house, which has become the source of his fear and loneliness. The only communication between Hugh and his father is when the latter comments on report cards and the untidiness of the house (Hugh’s mother’s mental state has excused her of all domestic tasks, so now Hugh has also taken on the role of housekeeper). The absence of his father forces Hugh to compensate in his own way, replacing him as much as possible in every context. Hugh directs his admiration and attention to John, who helps him deal with his loneliness. Hugh feels comfortable around John which is why when they first enter the house, its uncanny atmosphere makes Hugh ask John to stay with him. He is clearly

afraid of finding his mother's second suicide attempt, yet, at the same time, he does not want to look like a "sissy." He does not want to expose his feelings for John for fear of scaring him away because even at age fourteen, Hugh knows that even a hint of homosexuality or homoeroticism in a heteronormative society would further reinforce his position as an outcast. Therefore, Hugh assumes a mature, masculine persona, calling John by his last name "Laney" in order to seem like a manly adult and also because he knows that John finds it sporty and sophisticated.

During the course of their conversation, Hugh mentions a big fight that he had at school when the other children called his mother crazy. Although Hugh tries to share "masculine" experiences and activities that he thinks John might enjoy, such as fighting, playing basketball and talking about new technologies (like television), this is all a masquerade or performance he puts on in order to gain acceptance. Inevitably, he reverts to his true self, discussing poetry, flowers, and his mother's baking skills. To Hugh, such topics are completely normal, whereas John is never comfortable with this "bromance." In fact, John despises Hugh because they do not own a television but instead have a radio. When Hugh asks John to come upstairs so he can show him his hi-fi, John's discomfort with this odd situation increases as he thinks "Who would buy a hi-fi when they didn't have television," thus assuming that Hugh must be lying in order to lure him upstairs (McCullers, *Collected* 165). Hugh's family cannot buy a TV and participate in 1950s consumer culture because of his mother's hospital expenditures. Hugh vocalizes this problem when John indicates that he cannot live without a TV (McCullers, *Collected* 163). Therefore, the lack of a television further positions Hugh as an outsider.

Hugh's feelings of loneliness and abandonment reinforce his grotesqueness. He has no friends other than John, who, as a matter of fact, cannot even be regarded a friend (he is barely an acquaintance). He cannot form a nurturing relationship with his father after his mother leaves for the hospital and thus has nobody in which to confide. He just believes John is there for him and clings to him so hard that John finds the situation too weird to tolerate. Hugh is so surrounded by abjection—the blood, rot, sickness, dejection and refuse of life—that he even thinks that a schoolmate who hardly talks to him will quench his emptiness. Instead, everyone breaks his heart, including John.



John is a fit, muscular athlete who likes eating big pieces of pie. Hugh knows this, which is why he lures him to his house with promises of food. Hugh's maternal side thus involves feeding those he loves, something that he himself does not get from his own mother who is more interested in escapism through shopping than her son. In many ways Hugh is starving both literally and figuratively—starving for nourishment but also hungry emotionally and psychologically. He looks to John for love and protection, and John provides glimpses into this world when he makes references to Boy Scout first aid when Hugh feels like fainting. However, John immediately makes the necessary corrections, talking mockingly and maturely in order to keep their relationship cool: “Does this establishment have anything pertaining to a cow?” John asks Hugh, “A white, fluid liquid. In French they call it *lait*. Here we call it plain old milk” (McCullers, *Collected* 160). Hugh transitions into a poem, which John finds “odd” (McCullers, *Collected* 164), and when Hugh speaks about his mother, John does not say much. He is in no place to support him emotionally. In fact, John does not even want to be in the same room with Hugh, and makes up an excuse—that he must go because he is obligated to sell tickets—just to leave the uncomfortable situation. With his masculine appearance and attitude, John is idolized by Hugh as a boy/friend. Hugh is searching for a manly father-figure who can help him stay strong during these difficult times. However, John behaves as if he is sick and tired of his girlfriend's endless need for attention, and flees the scene.

### 1.1.1. Queer Characters and Kinship Theory

Hugh's and John's relationship is clearly only one-sided, which is reinforced by the fact that John persistently reminds Hugh that he must sell the Glee Club tickets even when they are sharing a personal moment. Hugh is genuinely fond of John—“Hugh liked John better than any other boy in school” (McCullers, *Collected* 159)—whereas John does not want to be involved with him and wants to leave as soon as possible. Their relationship might not necessarily be a homosexual one but it is surely a homoerotic one. Nevertheless, it is a same-sex affection felt only by Hugh that is reinforced by his need for love and family: “He liked John better than any friend he had ever had. He felt more natural sitting across the kitchen table from John, somehow safer. As he looked

into John's gray, peaceful eyes, the balm of affection soothed the dread" (McCullers, *Collected* 161).

In her article on the relation between kinship and queer theory, Elizabeth Freeman critiques how heterosexual relationships steer society into behaviors predominantly based on procreation (297). However, as she claims, the pivotal reason for relationships between two people may not be the bearing of a child. Freeman cites Judith Butler who defines kinship as a "terrain [which] lies in its status as a set of representational and practical strategies for accommodating all the possible ways one human being's body can be vulnerable and hence dependent upon that of another, and for mobilizing all the possible resources one body has for taking care of another" (298). This clearly has nothing to do with creating new individuals, but rather caring for those who already exist. In this context, sex and sexuality lose their relevance. Freeman also draws a parallel between "social security" and kinship, stating that it is a form of cultural existence in the sense that it nurtures multiple requirements of one's body like "play, love and even violence" (298). Kinship can thus take all forms, even those that are coded as queer by heteronormative society. When Hugh loses his parents' interest, he tries to construct a new kinship network or family for himself, which he believes will take care of his bodily and psychological needs. At the center of this new kinship network is John, but his reluctance to participate suggests that this queer family will ultimately not fulfill Hugh's needs.

This idea is also related to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of "homosocial desire." In her work *Between Men*, Sedgwick points out the fact that just as women can love and support each other, men can also love each other and look out for one another's interests. Sedgwick notes that in heteronormative societies, the latent homosexual implications of such relationships are ignored even when they may exist. Patriarchy, says Sedgwick, forbids seeing such relationships as homosexual and pushes "obligatory heterosexuality." In other words, those involved in cooperative efforts may deny the homosexual dimensions of their relationship due to patriarchal conventions. In this case, John wants to leave the house right after Hugh invites him upstairs. While Hugh does so out of fear, John may have interpreted the invitation as homoerotic and therefore frightening in another way. Thus, John's persistence to leave the house can be

considered as part of this homosexual denial. However as Sedgwick expresses, given the fluid nature of human sexuality such relationships should be thought of as homosocial bonding (3–5). Moreover, as Lori J. Kenschaft argues, at the very least such relationships “present a fundamental critique of a society built around heterosexual couplings and procreative families” (230). In Hugh’s case, the relationship forms, in part, due to the dysfunctionality of his family; however, the unpredictability of human sexuality and the blurring of gender roles queer the situation beyond the level of mere critique.

Lois Tyson adds to this theoretical perspective by stating that “individual sexuality” is “fragmented,” and dynamic; that is, bound to change and multifaceted, and that there exists a whole range of “possible” sexualities (337). In other words, individuals may own various sexual orientations during their lives, including being gay, lesbian, bisexual, heterosexual and many others. Sexuality, she asserts, is fluid and “has a will, a creativity, an expressive need of its own” (337). As a postmodern theory, queer criticism thus resists the traditional specifications of gender and sexuality through ambiguous implications, which is compatible with McCullers’s project in this short story. “Queer criticism,” Tyson explains, “reads texts to reveal the problematic quality of their representations of sexual categories, in other words, to show the various ways in which the categories homosexual and heterosexual break down, overlap, or do not adequately represent the dynamic range of human sexuality” (338).

McCullers expresses her belief in sexual and gender ambiguity in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* when she states that “By nature all people are of both sexes” (119). She reflects this approach in almost all of her works through characters such as Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*, Jester in *Clock Without Hands*, and Antonopoulos and Singer in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. She even handles interracial homosexuality in the Jim Crow era in her novel *Clock Without Hands*. Jester’s interest in Sherman Pew, a black character is quite apparent. Moreover, these “vaguely homosexual” adolescents are “full of compassion” (Richards 159–160). In *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, McCullers emphasizes the interest Weldon Penderton, a high ranking officer, shows for an enlisted soldier, and in her short story “Sucker” there is a veiled depiction of male affection between Sucker and Pete. Sucker is an adolescent who lives at Pete’s house because his

parents have been killed in a car crash. Much like Hugh does to John, Sucker respects and admires Pete, seeing him as the only person upon whom he can rely.

What further complicates McCullers's writing is her occasional use of the word queer to describe sexually ambiguous characters and their relationships. In an attempt to explain what McCullers might have meant by the usage of this word, Melissa Free highlights the fact that the concept had a negative connotation in the United States during this era (427). Rachel Adams adds that the only notion queer suggested was sexual deviance (555). Additionally, Kenschaft reminds us that originally, the term was meant to denote "odd" or "off-beat" (221). Free points out that in the South in particular, queer was also associated with same-sex relationships and non-heteronormativity that challenged community building, religion and the nuclear family (431). Consequently, it became associated with abnormality in the sense that it signified immoral and unacceptable sexual behavior that defied social values and norms.

The South responded to same-sex desire with homophobia and rejection. However, McCullers generally endows queer love with optimism and affirms its existence in the modern world. Adams resolves these seemingly contradictory ideas by claiming that "McCullers, writing during an era when the dominant culture was intensely homophobic, [did not] anticipate the present revolutionary politics of queer theory and activism but, rather, that contemporary articulations of the queer offer an ideal vocabulary for understanding previously closeted aspects of her fiction" (554). Carlos Dews and Betty McKinnie maintain that her works are "a response to the South's homophobia and its strict demands of gendered behavior" (61). Moreover, Cook suggests including the uncanny as part of McCullers's queer framework, for "[i]n her best works the abnormal and bizarre is continually being turned into the familiar and the known" (18). At any rate, as Kenschaft notes, homoeroticism does not necessarily come to mean homosexuality in McCullers's fictional works. To her, such relationships "float in a social void, unrelated to either a homophobic society or a homosexual subculture" (220).

In "The Haunted Boy" the affection Hugh feels for John is more like what Sucker and Pete experience. It is more brotherly than Jester's and Penderton's relationship, and so it floats in this middle ground of interpretation. Theirs is an act of loneliness, perhaps to

fill a void, or maybe something more. Homosocial bonding can compensate for weakness, but it can also quench other desires. As Kenschaft argues, McCullers creates her queer characters for a reason (220). Here, family fails to fulfill its duty and forces individuals to seek care in others. In Hugh's case, he cannot even obtain what he desires in another adolescent, and so is left to his own devices. As a result, he is forced to become an adult in a relatively short period of time. Even though Hugh's father mocks his weeping saying "Nobody can be nervous before they are sixteen years old," (McCullers, *Collected* 169), Hugh knows that his life will never be the same again and that the innocence of childhood will never return: "He knew something was finished; the terror was far from him now, also the anger that had bounced with love, the dread and the guilt" (McCullers, *Collected* 170). He turns into an adult and leaves his fears behind. Nevertheless, it is not clear if he will ever overcome his feelings of loneliness, abjection and emptiness. While "he was no longer a haunted boy, now that he was glad somehow, and not afraid" (McCullers, *Collected* 170), that does not necessarily signal the resolution of his other problems.

## 1.2. "BREATH FROM THE SKY"

"Breath from the Sky" is a heartbreaking story of a girl named Constance who is physically weak and in constant need of assistance due to her sickness, tuberculosis. The story opens with Constance sunbathing in front of the house. She feels extremely exhausted due to her illness, yet she is content that her doctor has finally allowed her leave the house, which she clearly hates. She asks her nurse, Miss Whelan, where her mother Mrs. Lane is and learns that she and her siblings, Mick and Howard, have gone out to buy swimsuits. Like Hugh's mother, Constance's mother is the source of her trauma and a character who fails to respond to her daughter's need for attention, albeit for very different reasons (Hugh's mother cannot due to her own condition, whereas Constance's mother chooses not to). Constance feels isolated, estranged and abandoned by her family, and her mother and siblings do very little to ease her fears, which include the possibility of death.

Constance is supposed to return to the hospital in Mountain Heights for her treatment within a very short time. Meanwhile, her sister Mick persistently asks their mother

whether she will take them swimming. Constance asks her mother several times if she will be alone during her trip to the hospital. The question “Am I going up there by myself?” however is an interrogation with a deeper meaning. She would like to know whether she is alone in life and whether she will die alone. The first time she answers, Mrs. Lane implies that Constance needs to be alone and has to take care of herself. The second time Constance asks the same question, she receives a clearer reply which suggests that the support her mother provides will be just as limited. In essence, Mrs. Lane makes a choice, selecting to entertain her healthy children rather than caring for her sick one. Constance witnesses her mother and siblings leave for the swimming pool, and as a consequence of this abandonment, Constance dies.

### 1.2.1. Color Imagism

Color imagery is one of McCullers’ favorite ways to create meaning. It is frequently observed in her works and is most often deployed to heighten their gothic elements. The colors in “The Haunted Boy” are used to stand for numerous images such as blood (red), innocence/purity (white) and sadness/coldness (blue), which incidentally are also the colors of the American flag. McCullers also makes effective use of color in “Breath from the Sky” in order to offer a more vivid portrayal of Constance’s world. She uses a whole palette of colors in her symbolism, much like her contemporary, Tennessee Williams, does with his technique of color imagism in his plays. These colors are also used to create and compare dualisms, especially those pertaining to Constance’s suffering. One of these colors is yellow. Yellow is ingeniously placed in order to symbolize Constance’s sickness. Like in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the walls of Constance’s bedroom are yellow, which represents the constrictive nature of tuberculosis. The sun, which is also yellow, becomes a symbol of the sickness, with its hot piercing rays. There are also several examples in the story where she feels hot, mainly due to her sickness, “After breathing the yellow walls of her room for so many weeks in stingy hot breaths” (McCullers, *Collected* 28).

The blue sky and water contrast with this sickly yellow: “She thought about water, looking down into great jade swirls of it, feeling the coolness of it on her hot limbs, splashing through it with long, effortless strokes. Cool water—the color of the sky”

(McCullers, *Collected* 31). The perpetual references to blue, blueness and cool are used to embody Constance's craving for freedom and recovery, for a time when she could breathe freely and escape the hot feverishness she barely tolerates: "Her mother stood against the sun, stopping some of the glare so that she could look into her eyes. They were the color of the sky in the cool morning. ... Blue as the sky before the sun had burned it to its gaseous brilliance" (McCullers, *Collected* 34). When Constance's mother leaves with her siblings, she leaves an unhealable wound in Constance's heart, and it becomes clear that the only "breath from the sky" she will receive will be the welcome release of death and her ascension to heaven. Margaret McDowell also notices the importance of color in this story, adding: "Reclining in a chair on the lawn, she envies her family as they leave to go swimming, and she longs to be washed by the blue lake and to suck the blue sky into herself in order to make the color a part of her, thereby enlivening the dull gray of her existence" (117).

The color pink is used to indicate health. While Constance is enveloped in yellow, "[s]he stared at the nurse's face, at her white clad bulging body, at her hands serenely folded over her stomach. And then at her face again—so pink and fat that why—why wasn't the weight and the bright color uncomfortable—why didn't it sometimes droop down tiredly toward her chest?" (McCullers, *Collected* 28). Constance refers to such healthy bodies throughout the story: "Especially Mick—trying to straddle King with her muscular little legs, clinging to his flexed body" (McCullers, *Collected* 29). She is obviously jealous and deep down believes the reason why her mother is so indifferent is her tuberculosis. Constance cannot spend time with her family because of her illness which is why Mick is surprised that King, their dog, remembers her.

### **1.2.2. Female Bodies, Oddities, and the Object**

Although Constance's interest in other people's bodies is understandable since she assumes that without the illness, she would have been able to get the attention she wants, this obsession can also be evaluated in terms of queerness. Constance's focus on her sister Mick's body may be read as queer desire, which she innocently considers as a way to obtain her mother's affection. As Gleeson-White asserts, "When women register in McCullers's texts, they are either masculine, adolescent tomboys, absent mothers, or

dying or dead, often as a result of childbirth” (*Strange* 42), and McCullers’s short fiction is full of such examples. The mothers in “The Haunted Boy” and “Breath from the Sky” are not just absent, but absent as a result of illness. Hugh’s mother attempted suicide because of a failed pregnancy, whereas Constance’s mother is an outsider in her daughter’s life probably because she cannot cope with the impending death of her child. Mick, on the other hand, is not only tomboyish in appearance but takes on a masculine persona, as suggested by her physical appearance, her sister’s homoerotic attraction, and her male name.

McCullers does not expect lovers and beloveds to follow any pattern. Constance’s need for her mother’s affection is apparent and she engages in a relationship with her sister Mick as a way to get to her mother. This is quite an odd relationship and the basis of a love triangle in much the same way that Hugh and his father are both husbands to Hugh’s mother. Constance and Mick do not really talk to each other but nevertheless compete over their mother’s affection, with Mick substituting for their absent father. Their communication is fairly limited and only includes Constance’s short replies to Mick’s eager questions. While Mrs. Lane is cutting Constance’s hair, Mick asks: “‘No little fuzzes around your neck, I hope.’ ‘No,’ said Constance, looking at her little sister” (McCullers, *Collected* 32). Gleeson-White and Free claim that in McCullers’s work, that which is not vocalized implies more than what is actually said. Gleeson-White explains that “it is what is not said that the reader must attend to in order to uncover inverted desire” (*Strange* 39). Free adds that much of McCullers’s meaning is “conveyed through silence and exemplified by the figure of the mute” (426). Although both refer to the mute in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, John Singer, it is also possible that McCullers employs this idea of silence to represent queer individuals such as Constance and Mick, who are mostly silent towards each other. In this scene, Mick speaks only when she wants to make sure that their mother has trimmed Constance’s neck, something that usually accompanies a short male haircut which Constance receives in an attempt to cool her down. Moreover, the title of the short story, “Breath from the Sky,” is even more significant in this context as breaths are silent in the sense that they are absences of speech (one cannot inhale and speak at the same time).



Gleeson-White's evaluation of virile bodies sheds light on why Constance's silent gaze of Mick's body necessitates a queer reading: "A woman's body is fluid while a man's is hard; fleshy while his is taut; penetrable while he (the penetrator) is impenetrable. It is this virile body that is often central to McCullers's presentation of the homoerotic couple because male same-sex desire has a virilizing force; it is as if manliness rubs off on the lover and/or the beloved" (Gleeson-White, *Strange* 47). In this sense, Mick's body, much like John's body in "The Haunted Boy," is presented as a healthy, attractive, able "masculine" body that elicits a homoerotic gaze. Constance's and Hugh's bodies are the exact opposites: both shun the outdoors, athleticism and prefer indoor activities, such as reading and poetry.

Constance's descriptions of Mick's body differ in that they narrate the healthy body of a masculine (tom)boy attached to a girl's head, further queering the situation. "To look at the three of them, standing there in the shade from the oaks, somehow made her more tired than she had felt since she came out. Especially Mick—trying to straddle King with her muscular little legs, clinging to his flexed body that looked ready any moment to spring out at her" (McCullers, *Collected* 29). Also, "The sick girl looked at the flexed muscles of the child before her, and then gazed back at the sky" (McCullers, *Collected* 33). The two quotations stress Mick's muscular masculine body and her desire to dominate both King, their dog, and her sister Constance. That Constance is attracted to Mick's body is also reinforced by her desire to unite with her family, specifically with her mother. This body is not just attractive to Constance because it is manly, but also because it is the healthy body she lacks, and this is what prevents her from joining the family unit. "Naked, except for her swimming trunks," Mick's "plump little chest gleamed silky white in the sun" (McCullers, *Collected* 32), something that Constance constantly envies. When she sees her siblings moving energetically, she senses exhaustion in her own body. She knows that she cannot keep up with them under these conditions and this makes her even more isolated and unhappy.

Much like the boyish Mick in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Mick from "Breath from the Sky" represents complicated sexual relations and blurred gender roles. She also embodies the idea that love can assume infinite possibilities, especially in terms of lovers (subjects) and beloveds (objects). The quotation from McCullers's *The Ballad of*

*the Sad Café* that the lover, like the beloved, “can be man, woman, child or indeed any human creature on this earth” (McCullers, *Collected* 216) symbolizes this queerness. Constance’s desire to become healthy and her affection towards Mick’s and King’s healthy bodies, organs and muscles are demonstrations of sexual and corporeal limitlessness. Just like queer theory asserts, there are no end to the binary oppositions created by society; nevertheless, there are always alternate systems that defy these oppositions, and as Julia Kristeva argues, there is power in abjection. In her book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, Kristeva defines abjection in ways that are directly applicable to Constance’s situation. To begin with, Kristeva defines the abject as being “jettisoned” and “excluded” (2), much like Constance who is jettisoned and excluded from her family due to her advanced tuberculosis. She cannot leave her bed and her family members, including the pet dog, prefer spending time with each other, never making an effort to approach the diseased abject subject. Constance desperately wants them to spare some time for her, but they seem oblivious to her suffering. Her isolation and loneliness are heartbreaking, and she suffers and dies alone.

Kristeva also conveys that “[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). Constance’s body clearly does all of the above, rendering it grotesque, abject and queer, since on many levels queerness also means the defilement of social constructions. In Constance’s case, her sickly, disorderly body, and her desire for the healthy bodies of her siblings and pet dog, signifies incestuous, corporeal abjection. According to Kristeva, abjection has no borders or ethics; in fact, it is “a passion that uses the body for barter” (4). What Constance would like to do is eat or consume these healthy bodies much like a cannibal, or engage in coitus with them so that she can regain her strength and her mother’s attention. Kristeva highlights that abject is perverse and that “it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule ... but ... corrupts, uses them, takes advantage of them” (15). At the end of the short story after her mother leaves with the other kids, Constance grotesquely imagines their “half naked bodies and the towels they flapped lustily at each other’s rears” (McCullers, *Collected* 35). She knows that she has lost her family forever and discovers that her abject body is not powerful, but valueless and cheap. Unlike “The Haunted Boy,” “Breath from the Sky” does not offer any optimism. Constance dies and finds endless freedom in the sky

and in her own blue pool. She gives up the breathing that she finds so difficult to perform with her illness.

### 1.2.3. Gothic Elements and Other Motifs

The power of gothic writing comes from the playful usage of suspense. In both short stories, McCullers's narrative style evokes feelings of tension and horror, and the anticipation of dark events. "Hugh sickened with a sudden chill remembrance of 'the other time'" (McCullers, *Collected* 158), and so does the reader, expecting him, this time around, to find his mother's dead body in a pool of blood. The fact that Hugh's mother did not leave a note, and that "the smell of varnished stairs, the sight of the closed white bedroom door at the top revived again 'the other time'" (McCullers, *Collected* 160), only increases her chances of suicide and the feeling of suspenseful anticipation. According to Ellis, this is exactly what gothic offers that other genres do not: "The Gothic, as a genre, continually takes us out there, below ground and behind the door we would rather leave closed" (xvi), such as Hugh's bathroom door.

These suspenseful scenes are also reinforced by meticulously placed images. The continuous mention of red, which is the color of blood; black which symbolizes darkness and isolation; and white, which is the color of the bathroom door that was stained by blood "the other time" transform a regular southern suburban home into a gothic haunted house: "The sun shone on a red piece in the flowered rug. Red-bright, red-dark, red-dead .... The red darkened to a dizzy black" (McCullers, *Collected* 158). Hugh's mother's trauma is echoed in her "blueness," her feelings as well as the color of the dress and shoes she buys while shopping. His beating heart, which thumps like a basketball, also evokes the fear and nervousness of "that other time," when the "red turned again to whirling, sick dark" (McCullers, *Collected* 160). This mysterious atmosphere is recreated in "Breath from the Sky" when Miss Whelan reminds Constance of "'the time [she] had last night'" (McCullers, *Collected* 28), a trauma that is used to keep Constance away from the family for which she so desperately yearns.

Silence is another cause of tension and suspense in both stories and reinforces the gothic elements in both works. Neither Hugh nor Constance can get answers from their

mothers when they ask important questions, which reminds Hugh of the other time: “‘Mamma!’ Hugh called. It was then, in the unanswering silence ... Hugh felt there was something wrong....Hugh shivered” (McCullers, *Collected* 158). For Constance, silence is associated with the color white, which symbolizes the emptiness she feels inside. Miss Whelan fails to answer the question “‘Where’s mother?’” the first time around, which forces Constance to ask the question one more time until she gets an answer (McCullers, *Collected* 27). While she just wants to make sure that her mother is out with her indifferent siblings whom she thinks are ready to forget her, the silence means much more, and speaks volumes. The silence is eventually shattered on the second attempt by Miss Whelan’s answer, which is the exact opposite of silence: “‘Such a loud voice. Loud enough to shatter the fragile sprays of the spirea so that thousands of tiny blossoms would float down, down, down in a magic kaleidoscope of whiteness. Silent whiteness’” (McCullers, *Collected* 27).

The flower, the spirea, actually symbolizes Constance herself. McCullers relates the white flower to her innocent dying body and in most of the descriptions, like the one above, the flower is withering and wilting, much like the dying adolescent. It is a fairly delicate, but easy-to-care for flower, that blossoms between the late spring and late summer, suggesting that with summer in full bloom, Constance has very little time left. Mrs. Lane implies that she takes care of her daughter at night, while she is sleeping, through a reference to the flower, further underscoring their detached relationship: “‘At night, though. That’s the time to look at them. Last night I stood by the window—and the moonlight was on them. You know how white flowers are in the moonlight’” (McCullers, *Collected* 34). Phillips also thinks that the flower motif is an allegory of Constance’s loneliness, isolation and abandonment, adding that “[b]oth her shorn hair and the cut flowers are symbolic of the sapping of her strength, the nipping of the bloom of her youth” (174).

Although they are set in two different time periods, both stories also deal with health-related issues. “Breath from the Sky” was probably written in the mid-1930s, while “The Haunted Boy” is set in in the 1950s. According to Mike Martin’s and Margaret Humphreys’s comprehensive work on the diseases of the American South, in the 1930s tuberculosis was not among the list of illnesses that crippled the region (863). As Carr

explains, McCullers might have used this illness because as an adolescent, McCullers's rheumatic fever was wrongly diagnosed as tuberculosis and this caused her undue suffering, agony and unnecessary treatment (*Understanding* 162). Patrice Bourdelais also states that tuberculosis, or consumption as it was known in the nineteenth century, has historically been regarded as a "romantic disease" because it causes intense sensitivity in the afflicted individual (114). The sufferer gradually dies of the sickness, but it also offers them the perfect opportunity to slowly "arrange their affairs" (115), much like Constance attempts to do with her family. In "The Haunted Boy" Hugh's mother's illness triggers a similar rupture between mother and son. She becomes so depressed due to the tumor which she thought was a baby that she attempts suicide in the bathroom of her spotless southern suburban home—a very appropriate choice for 1950s, domesticated Baby Boom America.

Both stories are set in Georgia, McCullers's home state, and are clearly stories of the real American South. Even though they are told through the gothic mode, McCullers illustrates that Southern Gothic does not always mean literal decay and monsters. Demons, devils, saviors and angels can come in all forms, whether they are dysfunctional families, queer relationships, irreparable wounds, physical and mental illness, problematic emotional bonds or a twisted kind of optimism. More importantly, Southern Gothic is a way to express transgression through writing that acknowledges geography. Ultimately, by challenging gender roles and social norms, Hugh and Constance symbolize a changing South. Even though they try to lessen their suffering by adopting a precocious maturity, they learn, much like the protagonists in the next two short stories, that the adult Southern Gothic world will never provide them with any sort of comfort or resolution.

## CHAPTER 2: THE FREAKISH AWAKENING: “LIKE THAT” AND “WUNDERKIND”

Kassia Boddy refers to Julian Hawthorne, the son of Nathaniel Hawthorne, in her Introduction to *The American Short Story since 1950* as emphasizing that Americans prefer the short story because it is self-contained in that it does not require any historical background (2). Boddy adds that “while not everyone had the technical skill to write a poem or the time to write a novel, surely everyone had a short story in them” (2). Here, Boddy implies that short fiction is perfectly compatible with American identity. Bret Harte, whose perspectives on the short story are also quoted by Boddy, suggests that Americans enjoy this particular type of writing mainly because it addresses a situation directly and “without an unnecessary word” (qtd. in Boddy 3). In other words, Americans appreciate and value the economy of language. Thus in many ways, the short story has come to represent America: fast-paced, time-efficient and self-reliant.

Rubin, Jr. claims that one of McCullers’s strengths, and one reason why her works are universal and will stand the test of time, is its elision of history (113). However, Boddy disagrees, arguing that every American short story is a reflection of the nation’s history and the maturation of its people. While not historical *per se*, McCullers’s stories involve coming-of-age journeys and in that sense reflect America’s own growth. The focus of this chapter, “Like That” and “Wunderkind,” narrate the development of two adolescents and in doing so, contribute to southern literary history and the American short story tradition.

Loneliness and isolation are two central themes in McCullers’ works, especially those that focus on adolescent characters. In his article “Carson McCullers and Southern Women’s Nonfiction Prose,” Will Brantley highlights the time period in which McCullers lived and explains why this is significant for her works: “Most of McCullers’ best work was produced during the war years. She could easily relate the war to her own themes, for paradoxically the war was an event that separated people and yet brought them together at the same time” (12). This idea may also explain why she constantly makes use of physically and psychologically grotesque characters in her works. She depicts characters who either physically lack a part of their body or an ability. Many of

her characters also suffer from mental illness, which amplifies their loneliness, isolation and marginalization.

Parental loss or absence—the literal or figurative state of being an orphan—is an overriding theme in her works. It prevents characters from bonding with others and creating connections and empathy with other human beings. This often leads to grotesque “abnormal” behavior and dysfunction, especially in the realm of love. They seek love, love from anywhere and anybody, but face disappointment. In McCullers’s world, it is impossible to find it and there is rarely a happy ending. Adolescents are not immune to this, and in many ways are the perfect vehicle for McCullers’s thoughts on the subject because they represent change, transition and self-searching. In “Look Homeward, Americans,” McCullers explores the connection between adolescents and America:

Lester, a footloose adolescent, does not appear to have very much in common with our poets of the time before the war—with Wolfe and Hart Crane. But their longing, their restlessness, their turning to the unknown is the same... And the world of these poets, and of all of us who lived before this debacle has been ruthlessly amputated from the world of today. Frontiers, both of the earth and of the spirit, were open to them and have since been closed to us. America is now isolated in a way that we never before could have foreseen. (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 212)

She adds, “America is youthful, but it cannot always be young like an adolescent who must part with his broken family, America feels now the shock of transition” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 213). According to McCullers, adolescence is a road to liberty in an environment that is full of violence and trauma. America was built on this, “So we must turn inward. This singular emotion, the nostalgia that has been so much a part of our national character, must be converted to good use. What our seekers have sought for we must find” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 212–213). McCullers thus regards the America of this era, the 1930s and 40s, as a nation in transition; in other words, an adolescent. However, for her this is a sign of hope, and an opportunity to right historical wrongs: “But a new serene maturity will come if it is worked for. We must make a new declaration of independence, a spiritual rather than a political one this time” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 213).

In *Radical Innocence*, Ihab Hassan expresses that “half a century ago, we used to say that the great and abiding theme of American literature was the theme of innocence; now, after fifty full years of strange history, we recognize that America has at last come of age, that it has plucked the fruit of knowledge .... The Song of Innocence, we are asked to believe, has finally given way to the Burden of Experience.” Hassan states literature generated in America has reached a point of maturity and should not deal with innocence but rather experience. Hassan suggests what Modernists can offer is “the encounter between the self and the world in fiction, that confrontation of the ‘hero’ with experience” (34–35), which is exactly what McCullers presents, especially in her works of short fiction. No one is innocent, including children, and all grapple with the burden of experience. Moreover, there are no true heroes or winners. At best, only anti-heroes and survivors.

Hassan reinforces this concept by asserting that “Innocence is tucked away in the past—when the land was still young and unblighted when the child ran freely in the cornfields— or else it is tucked deep in the subconscious” (50). As an author who subverts innocence and argues that it never really exists, McCullers is not as concerned with the past as other Southern Gothic writers, especially Faulkner. To her, the past, the Old South, is irrelevant because it is a myth that was constructed by Lost Cause ideology. It is the New South, the present and future, children and adolescents without a past, without the baggage of history, where real hope and change lies. However, that does not make them immune to the grotesque. On the contrary; it makes them the cleanest and purest reflection of it, since they are able to absorb and display their environment more vividly than any other age group. Hassan’s comment on Sherwood Anderson’s stories reflects this very clearly: “innocence lost, wasted desire, youth licked before it starts, truth misshapen into a grotesque parody of itself” (50). And, as all Southern Gothic writers maintain, truth lies in parody, in the grotesque, in the exaggeratedness of life.

In “Like That,” there is an ambitious thirteen-year-old narrator who tries to defy the Freudian essentialist dictate of “biology is destiny.” She challenges gender roles and refuses to conform to social norms, and in a sense represents America—rebellious, free-spirited and independent. This chapter also analyses “Wunderkind,” which focuses on



another female adolescent who questions the acts and morals to which she is exposed and as a result, works for change. Although her struggle is not rewarded, she emerges as a self-sufficient individual who is sure of her values and ethical code. In short, these two stories narrate growth through transition and the journeys that are part of ones' coming-of-age, whether of an individual or a society.

## 2.1. "LIKE THAT"

The nameless thirteen-year-old narrator discusses how happy she was before her older brother and sister underwent adolescence. One day the narrator's older sister, Marian, starts dating a boy named Tuck; yet the narrator does not consider this relationship a problem because she always feels included. Tuck is a college student and has a car, and frequently comes over to take Marian out on a date. Marian is eighteen years old and shares a bed with the narrator, adding a queer and homoerotic overtone to this work. Moreover, the narrator, Marian and Tuck spend a lot of time together, while Dan, the narrator's seventeen-year-old brother, does not spend much time with the sisters and has built himself a world with his own friends. The narrator also notes how he has changed physically, especially his face, and behaviorally.

Marian loves Tuck very much and talks about him whenever she and the narrator sit on their bed. At first, the narrator does not have difficulty sharing her "Sis" with Tuck, but one evening when the narrator is playing with her friends outside everything changes. She sees Marian and Tuck passing by in his car and she tries to say "hi," but neither Marian nor Tuck takes notice. Much like Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*, the narrator suddenly becomes an outsider in this love triangle with her sibling. That night when Marian returns home, she speaks to her mother in a "funny" voice, probably because she is drunk. After this exchange with their mother, Marian goes straight to her bedroom where the narrator asks her if she has had a fight with Tuck. At first Marian says "no," but then she changes her answer to yes. It is obvious that she does not want the narrator, a pesky prying child, to ask more questions. That night Marian, who has come of age, does not even allow the narrator to touch her, which is unusual since they are quite affectionate towards each other. The following day, Marian is furious and "mean," and although it is not openly stated, the reader can infer that Marian and Tuck

had sex the night before. Her anger also suggests that it may not have been consensual and that perhaps Marian was even raped.

The narrator questions her relationship with Marian, especially after Marian treats her cruelly. Marian does not want to talk to anyone and wants to be left alone. She clearly had a terrible night, which reinforces the possibility of rape. When she hears footsteps outside while reading a book, Marian panics thinking that Tuck will come to their house. The narrator, on the other hand, feels terrible because Marian is angry with her. She tries to comfort her by talking to her, when all of a sudden the narrator remembers the time Marian had her first period. The narrator realizes that adolescence is a time of confusion and change, and fears what will inevitably happen to her. She learns that women's futures are, in her society, shaped by their biology (as wives, mothers and daughters) and refuses to allow this to be her destiny. She sees the constructedness of gender roles and how women's sexuality can also be dangerous in a patriarchal world in that it exposes them to abuse and exploitation. She feels guilty about being too hard on Marian and starts to understand what it means to be a young adult.

After this experience, Marian and Tuck go out to eat and the narrator sits by her parents for the rest of the day, as if she is trying to savor the last moments of childhood. When they return, she sees that nothing has changed and has an epiphany that life will never be the same from now on. She realizes that Marian will stay with Tuck, and has chosen him over her, even though he needs to return to the college for the semester. The narrator feels completely abandoned despite the fact that she is right next to them. Three has become a crowd, and vows never to be like Marian. She promises never to allow a boyfriend to change her in this way and to fight all social roles imposed on her. She does not want to grow up if the adult world is "like that."

Although not directly stated, "Like That" is set in a southern state, and there is palpable evidence that the setting is the South. To start with, the narrator mentions the heat which is characteristic of the area. "Our room was so hot that you could almost touch the air with your finger" (McCullers, *Collected* 53). McCullers uses the heat motif when the atmosphere is tense. This is one of those scenes where Marian is anxious and does not want to be questioned about the previous night, especially by the narrator, since that night represents her sexual initiation. Additionally, there is a scene where the narrator

and her parents are trying literally and figuratively to keep cool by drinking iced tea on the front porch. Marian's father is clearly bothered by the fact that Marian and Tuck have spent all day together, especially since her mother has probably mentioned what happened the other night. The narrator sets the scene by saying it is almost evening and the weather is still hot. This is another uneasy scene where Marian is deliberately reminded that Tuck has to leave, and that they should probably break up. Marian storms into her room, probably to cry, and the narrator adds that "it was hotter than ever" (McCullers, *Collected* 55). Above all, the short story is set in a part of the country where women are still supposed to act virginally and submissively, and one where there is a great deal of abject poverty (they share the same bed, after all). In other words, the South.

### 2.1.1. Grotesque Female Bodies and Southern Womanhood

"Like That" is an important McCullers story because it involves the open discussion of the female body and social expectations. These female bodies criticize Depression-era southern society through their form and representation. According to Gleeson-White, in Southern Gothic literature, the adolescent female body, with its fluids, confusion and sexuality, becomes a stage for the reenactment of southern history:

[T]he contorted and fragmented bodies that fill [McCullers's] stories ... own up to a tragic history in which they have partaken, even if in silence. Such a history not only [questions] ... burdensome models of femininity, but also slavery and its tragic legacy and a literally fatal regional patriotism, and it becomes marked on the bodies of [McCullers's] women. (Gleeson-White, "A Peculiarly" 46)

Grotesque bodies symbolize the South's grotesque history, but instead of segregating and shunning these bodies, writers such as McCullers and Flannery O'Connor place them at the center of their narratives, holding them up as mirrors to reflect the ugliness of southern society. In the opening remarks of "A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness," Gleeson-White emphasizes how writers such as McCullers dismantles the southern belle archetype through grotesque female bodies, especially abject, unstable ones, such as those undergoing puberty. While after the Civil War much about the South changed, as McCullers illustrates, perceptions and expectations regarding womanhood and women's bodies were still archaic. Through female grotesques,

McCullers argues that there is no ideal southern woman, and that she never actually existed. Instead, her heroines, her “true southern women,” transgress every sexual and gender boundary imaginable. In order to survive in the New South, McCullers asserts that women must be robust, self-sufficient and powerful, claiming their outsider status and abjection. Those who do not claim this status—those who are sickly, weak and feminine (like southern belles)—are ultimately eliminated.

In particular, McCullers’ women reject the impositions and burdens that society tries to place upon them. That is why this New Woman of the New South is utterly different in appearance and behavior than her nineteenth-century counterpart. As pioneers opening new doors, they are inevitably lonely, isolated and shunned by their peers. They are subverting constructed definitions of womanhood and in the process make a mockery out of traditional southern womanhood, especially its restrictive codes and rules pertaining to beauty and manners (Gleeson-White, “A Peculiarly” 52). As Gleeson-White comments, in the South, “feminine beauty [is] not something natural or innate, but ... wholly manufactured” and that “[t]he women who are associated with southern beauty are, in a nutshell, silly” (“A Peculiarly” 50). McCullers’s rebellious women illustrate how the southern idea of female beauty is based on artificiality and a lack of intelligence. This renders grotesque women genuine, clever and astute.

Before her relationship with Tuck, Marian is “smart as can be and has read more books than anybody I ever knew” (McCullers, *Collected* 48). This completely changes when she reorients her life around a man, which is exactly what heterosexist southern society expects her to do. Behaving otherwise is an act of rebellion and that is what appeals to the narrator. In the beginning, Marian had to be taught femininity. She had to be told that “she shouldn’t wear ankle socks because they might go down town or she ought to pluck out her eyebrows above her nose like the other girls do” (McCullers, *Collected* 49). As the story progresses, she no longer has to be told. However, this is accompanied by unhappiness and negative changes in Marian’s psychology. When the narrator realizes it is social pressure that makes women depressed, she announces that she does not want to be “like that,” rejecting norms and declaring herself a rebellious grotesque woman. Women in the south have become part of the social order by making sure that it is followed by other women. In other words, they become patriarchal women. Unless

they experience an epiphany like the narrator, they will remain complicit in their own oppression for the rest of their lives. Gleeson-White comments on this aspect of southern womanhood by saying: “I can only start to highlight the extremely vexed, contradictory, and hypocritical roles in which white women found themselves, roles which they themselves were often guilty of perpetuating” (Gleeson-White, “A Peculiarly” 49).

This short story gains greater significance in McCullers’s oeuvre when juxtaposed with more popular works, such as *The Member of the Wedding*. In the novel Frankie, the adolescent protagonist, falls in love with her brother, Jarvis, and his bride, Janice, and decides to join them on their honeymoon. To her, they represent “the we of me.” In other words, her identity is her brother and his wife, and only when they are together does she feel whole and complete. When she figures out that Jarvis and Janice are a couple and that only two can be in a marriage, her dreams of this grotesque love triangle are destroyed and she feels abandoned and dejected. Similarly in “Like That,” the narrator takes pleasure out of being with Marian and Tuck and feels complete when they are together. This changes when their relationship becomes physical and the narrator is excluded.

### **2.1.2. Tomboys and Queer Female Characters**

Like Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*, Mick in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and Mick in “Breath from the Sky,” the narrator in “Like That” is a tomboy, an androgynous girl who rejects gender binaries, especially those pertaining to clothing and behavior. In many ways, she transcends gender, making her what we would today call transgendered. As Louise Westling explains, there was a tomboy tradition in the antebellum South, but only for pre-pubescent girls. Once they entered adolescence, they would be forced to give up their gender-free lives and follow the strict tenets of the cult of domesticity, which included a rigid femininity:

In childhood, a lively girl could romp with boys, wear their clothes, and cut her hair short. She had complete physical freedom .... As Bertram Wyatt-Brown explains, the tradition seems to have been especially prevalent in the American South. In frontier days, girls were raised without much sexual differentiation from males until puberty. Later in the antebellum period a similar childhood liberty was

common, contrasting sharply with the absolute restrictions the patriarchy placed on adult women in marriage. (111–112)

In McCullers's works, tomboys are transgressive figures, mostly because they refuse to integrate into the feminine world during puberty, clinging on to their gender ambiguity sometimes at great personal cost (for example, Miss Amelia from *The Ballad of the Sad Café*). Even though the narrator in "Like That" is not an archetypal tomboy with her clothes and appearance, her lack of knowledge about the female body and her boyish attitude towards women's problems reflect a tomboyish sensibility. She is also very physically active, playing with other children, like a boy, when she should be indoors: "That night after Sis and Dan had left I had gone down to the corner with some kind of the kids in the neighborhood to chunk rocks at the street light and try to kill a bat up there" (McCullers, *Collected* 50). Additionally, the narrator overreacts when Marian and Tuck pass by without saying hello. The narrator is offended by Bubber's insensitivity and reacts in an aggressive masculine way: "I was mad all over like I get sometimes. I hauled off and chunked all the rocks in my hand right at him" (McCullers, *Collected* 50).

One of the most memorable tomboy characters, Joe, appears in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, which was published in 1868. However, in her book entitled *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History*, Michele Ann Abate argues that this archetype appears much earlier in American literature and was a product of the industrialization and urbanization of antebellum America. As families moved to cities, women were kept indoors, initially as a form of protection. Eventually, this grew into the Cult of True Womanhood. Domesticity, subservience, piety and purity became female virtues, and the best women were those who were slaves of the private sphere. Tomboyism, which allowed comfortable clothing, sports, and other outdoor activities, became a way out of the cult for many girls, with some extending it into adolescence and beyond (6–7). They first appeared as marginal characters in literary works, but this changed during and after the war when there was a blurring of gender roles as the nation was fighting to save itself, and then fighting to rebuild.

Abate calls tomboys "gender-bending female characters" because as time passed, they came to symbolize the unrestricted prospects normally attributed to men (xiii). Their masculine appearance and attitude allowed them to act freely, engaging in the public

sphere which was off-limits to women. They became queered as the twentieth century progressed, especially during the Great Depression when women were told to give up their jobs to men and embrace the private sphere, motherhood, and domestic thrift. During the Second World War, America encouraged its women to assume male tasks, like working in factories as “Rosie the Riveters,” since men were off fighting the war and their labor was needed. However, the tomboy specifically, and masculine women in general, once again became a threat in the 1950s, with its emphasis on marriage, domesticity, children, and rigid gender roles. In short, in the United States, tomboyism has been a “valuable code of conduct,” but only used when necessary (145).

McCullers uses the narrator, a tomboy figure, to defy Depression-era values such as femininity, motherhood and the domestic sphere. The narrator embraces boyish qualities in opposition to the social code, and is reluctant to forsake her masculinity when she discovers its power. As a masculine girl, the narrator is also what southern society would define as grotesque, abject, queer or freakish, but as Kristeva argues, these too are powerful states of being. Abate says most girls of the 1930s were “capable, productive and industrious” (140) young ladies who did not challenge the male-controlled world and were not interested in bending any of the rules during such a difficult time, especially those related to gender. On the other hand, the central character in “Like That,” just like those found in other McCullers works, breaks this heteronormative cycle. As she describes, “I skate and ride my bike and go to the school football games every Friday. But when one afternoon the kids ... started telling certain things ... I got up quick ... and played basketball. And when some of the kids said they were going to start wearing lipstick and stockings I said I wouldn’t for a hundred dollars” (McCullers, *Collected* 56-57).

The narrator’s tomboyism and rejection of female clothing, accessories and behavior also symbolizes her rebellion against growing up and being controlled by the system (southern society). The narrator is a strong and self-sufficient young woman who lives outside of social norms through her tomboy behavior. Although she does not understand all the details of the female body, especially menstruation, sex and reproduction, she does not elide them out of fear. Rather, it is because the narrator knows that once she enters this female world, it will be much more difficult to leave it, and she does not

want to end up like Sis, who went from being intellectual (“grotesque” and powerful) to being submissive (“normal” but weak).

In the beginning of the short story, the narrator admires Marian: “She’s smart as she can be and has read more books than anybody I ever knew—even school teachers. But in High School she never did like to priss up flirty and ride around in cars with girls and pick up the boys and park at the drug store and all that sort of thing” (McCullers, *Collected* 48). However, her admiration begins to fade as Marian becomes older and more feminine—in other words, a submissive southern woman—which means less interest in the academic world. She quits reading and spends her time on her appearance, which is seen as a wiser investment by their heterosexist society.

Marian withdraws from this world every time she goes through a hardship, especially with her relationship. She, like the narrator, is an anti-hero in that sense. She plays the part of an emotionally fragile and sensitive girlfriend, and when she fights with Tuck, she cries and acts numb until the narrator shows some affection in bed, which she has not left the entire day. Then, she overreacts and pushes the narrator away by kicking her: “She was trembling all over. When I got close to her she jumped like I’d pinched her and pushed me over quick and kicked my legs over. ‘Don’t,’ she said. ‘Don’t’” (McCullers, *Collected* 51–52). Metaphorically, Marian’s behavior represents a struggle between her two halves: her homosocial intellectual side and the heterosexual mindless persona she has created. Just which side will win this tug-of-war adds to the narrator’s confusion. As the narrator notes, Marian’s struggle begins with her first menstruation, which scares and infuriates the narrator because even as a child she recognized that this was a rite of passage that would forever change their lives. Moreover, the narrator herself is thirteen, which means that she will undergo the same transition in the near future: “It was a long time ago—when Sis was about thirteen. . . . It was a few mornings after that when Sis started with what every big girl has each month, and of course I found out and was scared to death. . . . I felt different toward Sis, too, and was so mad I wanted to pitch into people and hit” (McCullers, *Collected* 54). However, Marian is not a revolutionary character. She decides to obey the code of conduct enforced by southern society and consents to a life of submissiveness without question.



While Marian accepts her fate as a woman, the narrator is sickened, frustrated and furious that women have to suffer because of their bodily difference (anatomy is destiny), that they need to wear menstrual pads and endure physical pain and embarrassment, and that men experience no equivalent:

I was sitting on the bed, biting hard at my knee. "It shows," I said. "It does too!" She had on a sweater and a blue pleated skirt and she was so skinny all over that it show a little. "Anybody can tell. Right off the bat. Just to look at you anybody can tell." Her face was white in the mirror and did not move. "It looks terrible. I wouldn't ever ever be like that. It shows and everything." (McCullers, *Collected* 54)

While the narrator innocently and grotesquely believes that she can avoid menstruating by refusing it, and thus is doomed to a life of disappointment, McCullers's message here is clear: that hope dies last and that women must fight until all hope is lost, even if their fight is an impossible lost cause.

### **2.1.3. Pushing Patriarchal Boundaries**

The protagonist in "Like That" is actually quite a radical character. She defies social norms by rejecting traditional female adulthood. Hugh in "The Haunted Boy" also challenges gender roles by trying to homosocially bond with John, thereby defying heteronormative relationships. The narrator's tomboyishness transgresses male and female social roles, and even though she knows that it will make her a lonely outcast and misfit, she objects to falling in love with boys, and to loving them as Marian does. She also is uninterested in marrying and wearing make-up. She rejects leading an ordinary and traditional life just because society expects her to do so. As she announces,

I don't want to be any older if I'd get like Sis has.... I'd never let any boy in the world or any thing make me act like she does. I'm not going to waste my time and try to make Sis be like she used to be.... I know I'd never let anything really change me at all—no matter what it is.... 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. (McCullers, *Collected* 56-57)

One of the reasons why she rebels against growing up is the fact that she knows she will become estranged from her body. As Katherine Bell mentions in her article, "Grotesque Encounters with Adolescence," adolescence is a stage of awareness during which teenagers are defamiliarized with their body and the world they know (68).

Disappointment and trauma reach a dramatic state, especially in terms of disembodiment. Familial bonds are ruptured and revised as children reach adulthood, and the narrator is afraid of this process, just like the protagonists in “The Haunted Boy” and “Breath from the Sky.”

McCullers weaves this sense of loneliness and alienation throughout “Like That.” The narrator explains how she loses Dan, her brother, to his friends and later to college, and Marian, her sister with whom she shares a bed, to her boyfriend. “I never have been so lonesome as I was that night,” when she realized this double loss. As the narrator continues, “If ever I think about being sad I just remember how it was then—sitting there looking at the long bluish shadows across the lawn and feeling like I was the only child left in the family and that Sis and Dan were dead or gone for good” (McCullers, *Collected* 56). The narrator’s alienation is much more complicated than the inevitable “loss” of her siblings. It is compounded by the loss of her childhood, her body, and the freedom she will be giving up as she transitions to adolescence and adulthood. For the narrator, becoming a woman is the biggest loss because it is also a burden. Menstruation and its taboos, dating and its rituals, becoming a wife and mother, all frighten her. She rejects these gender roles thinking that she will feel safe and secure, but ultimately discovers that being a rebel and a pioneer is even lonelier than following the crowd. “I get lonesome—sure—but I don’t care” (McCullers, *Collected* 56) is her brave response to this reality.

As Westling expresses, “The girl who insists on following her ambitions almost inevitably pays the price of shame and guilt as an adult; she must live with a troubled sense of herself as a woman because she has abandoned the familiar boundaries of her gender” (113). The fact that McCullers does not even provide the narrator with a name implies that women often remain nameless in society. It also suggests that the narrator’s problem is universal, that many girls endure it, but that few vocalize it. The narrator may also be avoiding entering the adult world because she is afraid of (heterosexual) intimacy, the intricacies of relationships, and the eventual loneliness it will cause—she is afraid of becoming nameless and without an identity. Above all, she understands the harsh responsibilities of southern women, and refuses to participate in the system. Thus in this sense she is the initiated who rejects initiation, or becoming “like that.”

## 2.2. “WUNDERKIND”

Another remarkable female adolescent character is presented in McCullers’ “Wunderkind.” In this story, McCullers continues her tradition of creating strong central female characters that endeavor to become successful despite the struggles of adolescence. As the story opens, Frances, an adolescent, who is extremely enthusiastic about music, enters her piano teacher’s house for yet another lesson. She is so keen to learn that her aching fingers pretend to play the song that she hears from inside the studio, suggesting not only that she may suffer from a physical ailment but also that in spite of it, she is determined to reach her goal of becoming a concert pianist. Mr. Bilderbach teaches young and promising artists like Frances, whereas Mrs. Bilderbach, who used to be a musician, cooks and bakes for them. When there is nothing to do, she quietly sits in her room not to disrupt her husband’s lessons, thereby following the gender codes of the era. Mister Josef Lafkowitz, a violin teacher, is also at the Bilderbach house when Frances enters. He and Mr. Bilderbach are working on a “sonatina,” but Frances clearly feels uncomfortable around Mr. Lafkowitz. He asks her questions about her piano skills and incessantly compares her to his own student, Heime Israelsky, whose photo was recently published in a magazine. This makes Frances a little more insecure because obviously she has not made it into any magazines yet. Although she knows that Heime is a brilliant artist, and deserves the honor, she mocks his photo in order to process some of her personal disappointment.

Frances starts daydreaming while Mr. Lafkowitz and Mr. Bilderbach work together. Her dreams are as a result of the pressure she feels about not being good enough. Frances is worried because Mr. Bilderbach is unsatisfied with her music performance. Consequently, this surfaces in her dream in which she sees Mr. Bilderbach’s, Mr. Lafkowitz’s and Heime’s faces, all of which are rotating around her and talking to her in critical, deep voices, calling her a “wunderkind,” which actually aims to mock her.

Mr. Bilderbach calls Frances a wunderkind when he first starts instructing her, but Frances thinks she is undeserving of this name. Mr. Bilderbach calls her “bienchen,” a pet name in German, but when she makes too many mistakes, he addresses her by her name, Frances. Being a wunderkind has never been easy for Frances. She has had to

sacrifice everything for the piano and to prove herself to Mr. Bilderbach. She has no friends at school, and the closest thing she has to a friend is Heime, another wunderkind who started playing the violin at age four. He was homeschooled and clearly better at playing an instrument than Frances, who is jealous of his abilities.

On one occasion, they perform in a concert together and newspapers report that Heime's performance was much better than hers. At first, she blames the piece Mr. Lafkowitz picked for them to perform, and then comes up with other excuses to explain why her performance was insufficient. However, Mr. Lafkowitz believes that it is Frances's lack of emotion that is stunting her growth as a performer. When Frances graduates from junior high school, Mr. Bilderbach buys her a pink dress with white shoes, the colors of girlish innocence. Frances, on the other hand, is only thinking of ways to improve her performance. She decides that working harder is the solution.

Mr. Bilderbach proposes that they start over with a new approach to her studies. He assigns her a piece of music that he believes she will be able to perform well. However, Frances is very nervous and is unable to meet his expectations. Seeing her failure, Mr. Bilderbach asks her to play a simpler piece, but this does not help either. Overwhelmed by her negative emotions, Frances packs up her bag, dresses, and quickly leaves the studio.

### **2.2.1. Suffocating in the Male-Dominated World**

In this short story, McCullers narrates significant issues that impacted women's lives in the mid-twentieth century. Frances is an adolescent whose dreams are actually built on what her teacher, and his associate, envision for her. In other words, what the patriarchal order will allow her to pursue, which is very different than their plans for Heime. "Wunderkind" is thus a story of how women become paralyzed by society and how they lose their skills and determination as they mature into adults in a male-dominated world. Unlike Heime, who is constantly pampered and praised, Frances is criticized and browbeaten by Mr. Lafkowitz and Mr. Bilderbach, eventually spiraling into a helpless and hopeless state where she is no longer capable of functioning, let alone performing.

The story suggests that women give up the fight as adolescents and more often than not, accept their fate as women.

Heime is another male figure who stands in Frances' way in her struggle to become successful. Even though they do not engage in face-to-face encounters, the mere idea of Heime is enough to discourage Frances. She comes to hate him because he represents her disillusionment, which is reinforced by the fame and attention he receives, especially from the two male music teachers. She is clearly jealous of Heime and engages in a number of anger displacement rituals such as mocking his clothes, the way she thinks he smells, his height, and the way he holds his violin. She even attacks his masculinity, effeminizing him through the term "Sissy." She also claims that playing the violin is much easier, which is why someone like him is able to excel at it. While she tries to belittle him, deep down inside she knows that he is a better example of a wunderkind than she is, and will probably be far more successful in life just because he is male.

On the other hand, Mr. Bilderbach has a far more fatherly attitude towards Frances than Heime, which can be interpreted as a form of condescending paternalism in this gendered context. He tries to protect her from the pressure created by Mr. Lafkowitz, and avoids comparing her to Heime as Mr. Lafkowitz ceaselessly does. However, as Frances's performance declines, Mr. Bilderbach becomes convinced that she is no wunderkind. At the end of the story, he interrupts her recital in an attempt to make it better, but it has the opposite impact. His comments become fierce and visibly angry: "His face seemed to throb out in space before her, come closer with the lurching motion in the veins of his temples" (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 86). Ultimately, he emotionally abandons Frances. She loses her chief supporter and "father." Thus, these men do not provide Frances with the support she requires. Instead, they abandon her and prevent this child prodigy from becoming an artist. As patriarchs who are gatekeepers of the profession, they erect numerous barriers in front of Frances and symbolically, all women.

McCullers sees symphonies as a microcosm of the world in that they are comprised of different instruments and different musicians from diverse backgrounds. However, in "Wunderkind," there is no room for women in the symphony, which seems to be

dominated and regulated by Jewish men—a topic I will explore later in this chapter. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* Mick uses music as a way to escape her narrow and suffocating world (131). Spivak explains the significance of music in terms of its power to offer Mick a new life. Likewise in “Wunderkind,” Frances, who is lonely, has no “friends” other than Heime, and rarely goes outside, uses music as a way of building dreams of her future: she fantasizes about being published in magazines and praised by critics, most crucially by Mr. Bilderbach whose admiration she desperately seeks. Nevertheless, Frances is impeded by what Spivak calls “the constrictions of a legalistic (male) rationality” (132). Her dreams are killed by Mr. Bilderbach, Mr. Lafkowitz and Heime.

In “The Daughter as Outlaw in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*,” Keith Byerman notes that most of McCullers’s female characters, and daughters in particular, disobey patriarchal rules which is why they become misfits (19). Those rare female characters who follow the rules, like Marian in “Like That,” are protected by the patriarchy but at the cost of their freedom and identity as individuals. Byerman also blames fathers for their daughters’ behavior. He suggests that adolescent girls are not allowed to learn the patriarchal code as accurately as sons. As a result, they end up creating personal versions of the code that contradict and challenge the original. That is why they are doomed to fail in every aspect of life as outlaws who represent the “grotesqueries of female adolescence” (20).

Frances is like a daughter to the Bilderbachs, who have no biological children of their own. Instead, they create a non-traditional family with their students. Oliver Evans (*The Ballad*) and Alice Hall Petry have read Frances’s and Mr. Bilderbach’s relationship as more than just a father-daughter bond, suggesting sexual abuse which, in the context of this “family,” would constitute incest. This theory is reinforced by the gift of the pink dress and white shoes, which symbolize (a loss of) innocence and the transition to experience, as well as Mrs. Bilderbach’s eerie silence and her mysterious disappearance when students, especially Frances, appear. However, a surface reading of the text suggests that at the very least, the power relationship that exists between Frances and Mr. Bilderbach is one of a father and daughter. In general, he treats her with a paternal(istic) attitude, calling her “Bienchen,” which is a diminutive of the German

word for bee, and a pet name that German parents often use for their offspring. Mr. Bilderbach also displays fatherly expectations from her musical performances, and her inability to meet his expectations mirror that of a disappointed child.

What Byerman states about sons being informed about the patriarchal order is accurate in this context. Heime is like a son in this queer family. Mr. Lafkowitz is Heime's teacher and they come together with Mr. Bilderbach and Frances in the evenings to produce music together. They become a chamber-music-playing family (like the Von Trapps in *The Sound of Music*): Mr. Bilderbach and Mr. Lafkowitz are fathers, Mrs. Anne Bilderbach is the provider mother, and Frances and Heime are the daughter and son. Frances picks on Heime just as siblings would, and she is envious of her little brother. Heime is accepted by the patriarchal order because he is a "good little boy" who obeys and behaves appropriately. Frances is aware of this and wants to participate in the order by completing her queer musical initiation into this queer family, but as she soon discovers, the patriarchal order will always exclude women:

What had begun to happen to her four months ago? The notes began springing out with a glib, dead intonation. Adolescence, she thought. Some kids played with promise—and worked and worked until, like her, the least thing would start them crying, and worn out with trying to get the thing across... something *queer* [my emphasis] began to happen—But not she! She was like Heime. She had to be. (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 83)

Constance M. Perry argues that there is a resemblance between Frances and Mick, the protagonist in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. She stresses the fact that McCullers' female adolescent characters suffer from the experience that is obtained during their passage to adulthood. Usually, despite being extraordinarily talented, this prevents them from being professional artists (36-37). According to Perry, part of this suffering involves an unexpected and sometimes unwanted sexual awakening, which reinforces the theory of sexual abuse that forms the subtext of "Wunderkind." It explains Mr. Bilderbach's undue affection towards Frances. Moreover, it also clarifies why, repulsed by this, Frances decides she can no longer play the piano and dramatically quits at the end of the short story (39). Carr points to the sexually tense dialogue between Frances and Mr. Bilderbach as more evidence. Unsatisfied with her performance, he urges and persists (*Understanding* 134). Within kissing distance, "His face seemed to throb out in space before her, come closer with the lurching motion in the veins of his temples. In

retreat she looked down at the piano.... ‘I can’t,’ she whispered. ‘I don’t know why, but I just can’t—can’t anymore’” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 86). Perry adds that another reason why Frances decides to quit playing the piano is the fact that she will never be perceived as being as skillful as Heime because of her gender. In other words, she collapses under the weight of patriarchal pressure, which comes at her in every form possible (44).

Mrs. Bilderbach is another woman who succumbs under the pressure of male dominance. Once a musician herself, she has become a dolt—dimwitted and suffering from a lack of vision. In other words, what is bound to happen to Marian in “Like That.” “Mrs. Bilderbach liked [Frances] in her calm, almost dumb way... She was quiet and fat and slow” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 79). As a surrogate mother, she cooks and brings refreshments to the men and her “children,” but is neither skillful nor astute enough to be a teacher or an artist. Anne used to be a “lieder singer,” but now she is a Stepford wife, an empty shell with no identity who survives because of her perpetually robotic, smiling face: “[Mr. Bilderbach’s] wife stood stirring the thick soup until his hand grouped out and rested on her shoulder. Then she turned—stood placid—while he folded his arms about her and buried his sharp face in the white, nerveless flesh of her neck” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 79). Her stoicism is most likely her survival mechanism, especially in a patriarchal environment with undertones of violence and abuse.

One of the most striking scenes in “Wunderkind” is when the Bilderbachs take Frances dress shopping. Even though Frances does not care for the clothes she is going to wear for the graduation party, like parents, Mr. and Mrs. Bilderbach insist that she should get a dress. Just like in other McCullers stories, the central character (Frances) does not have a tangible relationship with her real parents. She sleeps over at the Bilderbachs’ house when it is too late to go home, barely mentions her father at their breakfast table, and never says a word about her mother. Like Mrs. Bilderbach she might be a shell or perhaps even dead. Either way, it is clear that she has little or no influence on her daughter’s life, which basically leaves it up to the men to instruct Frances on the gendered order of the world. Since the Bilderbachs do not have biological children, Frances, like the other students, becomes a substitute child. However, as previously mentioned, the selection of the pink dress and white shoes may not be as innocent as it



seems. Not only does it suggest motives of a sexual nature (innocence to experience), but it might also be an attempt to distract Frances from her goal of becoming a musician with girly, fancy gendered clothing. In other words, being a cute Shirley Temple doll may be a better choice for her in a patriarchal world. Frances senses this when Mr. Bilderbach picks pink for the dress and white for the shoes: “When Mrs. Bilderbach began to cut out the dress and fit it to her with pins, he interrupted his lessons to stand by and suggest ruffles around the hips and neck and a fancy rosette on the shoulder” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 82).

### 2.2.2. The Jewish Perspective

As the names and backgrounds of the characters suggest, Mr. and Mrs. Bilderbach, Mr. Lafkowitz and Heime are Jewish. This situation contributes to Frances’ artistic (dis)abilities by further positioning her as an outsider. In “Tension and Transcendence,” Larry Hershon focuses on Jewish identity in the works of Carson McCullers. Although she does not construct meaningful, detailed Jewish characters in any of her fiction with the exception of “Wunderkind,” they appear in the background of almost all of her works usually in “idiosyncratic” ways, like as the “sissy” Christ-killer Morris Finestein in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, for example (52–53). Hershon also adds that these Jewish characters symbolize “spiritual wisdom and oppression” (52). Even though Jews were exposed to the oppression of Fascism and Nazism during the 1930s and 1940s, and some, like the characters in “Wunderkind,” were able to escape it and preserve their culture through music and language, they often became complicit in other forms of oppression in the United States, especially against individuals who were not members of their own ethnic group (52). On one hand, they embody oppression; on the other, they represent wisdom with their skills and cultural sophistication. This phenomenon, which Hershon calls transcendence, is apparent in “Wunderkind.” Jewish musicians are glorified and Frances, the shiksa, even wishes that she could perform as well as “Myra Hess” and “Yehudi Menuhin” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 82). Frances thinks that because she is not Jewish, she will never be able to put their kind of spirit into her music. That is why Heime is a wunderkind and Frances is not.

In this work, McCullers generally engages in a positive Semitism, especially when compared to the anti-Semitism that defined the era. While the Jewish characters in “Wunderkind” are arguably inner-directed, favoring members of their own ethnic group over others, they are also industrious, promoting high standards and personal achievement despite the odds. Their patriarchal approach, if anything, is more WASP than Jewish in nature, suggesting that it may have been a means of assimilating into American society. According to Hershon, McCullers even tries to understand the oppression they faced in Europe and why they toil and find meaning in their work. Specifically, McCullers links music to Jewish identity and cosmopolitan culture. Mr. Bilderbach’s father is Dutch and his mother is from Prague, and although he was born in the United States, he lived in Germany as a child. Born in boring Cincinnati, Frances admires this sophistication and even tries to appropriate it. She asks “[h]ow do you say *cheese* in German? Mister Bilderbach, what is Dutch for *I don’t understand you?*” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 78).

Frances’s reoccurring nightmare, which involves the male characters repeating the word wunderkind while hovering over her head, complicates the portrayal of Jews in the short story, suggesting that there might also be a dark, gothic side to McCullers’s depiction of this ethnic group. Mr. Bilderbach, the head ghost or monster, looms largest in this disturbing dream, probably because of Frances’s closeness to and reliance on him as a father figure whom she is always trying to please. As soon as Frances senses Mr. Bilderbach’s disappointment in her abilities, the nightmare becomes worse: “In the dreams Mister Bilderbach’s face loomed out and contracted in the center of the whirling circle. The lip surging softly, the veins in his temples insisting” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 81). This nightmare also fuels a vicious cycle: the less confidence Mr. Bilderbach has in Frances, the worse her performances become. Moreover, it appears even more frequently when she is under patriarchal pressure, for Frances has already internalized the female need to please.

According to Alice Hall Petry, the recurring nightmare assumes an even darker meaning when read sexually. Frances is becoming too old to be a wunderkind, or child genius, thus suggesting that the disturbing dream, with its repetition of this term, actually represents her subconscious cry for help as a victim of child abuse. The fact that the

nightmare always includes Mr. Bilderbach—the sexual abuser/initiator—as the key figure reinforces this idea, which manifests itself as a grotesque Electra complex. This relationship, described by Sigmund Freud as a queer sexual affection between father and daughter, is just as common in Southern Gothic literature as its counterpart, the Oedipus complex (mother-son). As Petry claims in her article “Carson McCullers’s Precocious ‘Wunderkind,’” there is a continuous sexual tension between the two characters, which is heightened by their close physical proximity and the almost-orgasmic musical crescendos. Moreover, at the end of the story, Mr. Bilderbach is displeased by Frances’ Beethoven performance and asks her to play another piece. Petry reads this as “a failed sexual encounter,” citing the following lines from the short story as evidence: “She could not stop looking at him, sitting on one heel with the other foot resting squarely before him for balance, the muscles of his strong thighs straining under the cloth of his trousers.... She could not look down at the piano. The light brightened the hairs on the backs of his outspread hands, made the lenses of his glasses glitter. ‘All of it’ he urged. ‘Now!’” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 86).

At the very least, the nightmare is instructing Frances on what she should do: she should admit that she will never be a successful wunderkind, go home, and become the type of woman that society expects (that is, another Mrs. Bilderbach). Mr. Bilderbach’s face is the face of male oppression and his words are the precursor of an inevitable end that is forced on women. At the end of the story, he almost singlehandedly persuades her she is not a wunderkind and that she will never be one. She is so nervous that her hands become “quivering tendons,” “twitching unconsciously” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 77). In contrast, Mr. Bilderbach’s patriarchal, masculine hands are streamlined and sturdy. His “muscle-flexed finger,” the “hairy back of his hand,” and his manual dexterity while conducting symbolize male superiority and experience. Mr. Bilderbach’s manly and capable hands also control Frances’ fate and she can do nothing but watch them shape her world. Unlike Heime’s hands, which literally have no impact on her, Mr. Bilderbach’s are formidable. The fact that Frances recognizes this suggests that they too symbolize her sexual awakening, initiation, and transition from innocence to experience.

As a female character, Frances symbolizes all the women who have been convinced (by men) that they are not good enough, who feel isolated, abandoned and ostracized enough to quit. In patriarchal societies, men decide women's fates and in "Wunderkind" the men have decided that Frances must be eliminated from the world of music. However, before Frances leaves, Mr. Bilderbach gives her another chance. Although this appears to be an optimistic turn, his body language and words suggest the opposite: "Then suddenly he thrusts his manner brusquely aside ... His back was stiffly tilted, his legs looked tense" (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 83–84). His "slouched" posture bothers Frances and his remarks, which constantly interrupt Frances and render her silent, put her under even more pressure: "'Now we begin,' he said with a peremptory dart of his eyes in her direction" (84). His distracting glances, words and posturing also indicate what society thinks of women with talent. As Petry mentions, the music teacher's last name is intentional and meaningful. "Bilderbach" resembles the word "bildner," a "'shaper' or 'molder'" in German. Thus, Mr. Bilderbach's last name evokes the notion that he outlines and shapes Frances' world, while always retaining power. Once Frances protests his intrusions, he accepts his mistake, stops interfering and allows her to continue. However, he is the ultimate winner: "When the last note had stopped vibrating, he closed the book and deliberately got up from the chair. ... 'No,' he said simply, looking at her" (85).

Mr. Bilderbach's strength as a molder is reaffirmed at the end of the short story. His muscled body and determined, assertive stance contrast with Frances's weak physique and passivity. As a woman, she is helpless and powerless against male dominance. She feels displaced, lonely and abandoned, even though she is the one who leaves. She is left to enter a world with which she is unfamiliar—the gendered world of adult men and women—and naturally feels disappointed and confused. Being freed of all the stress and "restlessness," her hands are now "relaxed and purposeless" (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 87).

As illustrated by the two short stories examined in this chapter, in the genre of Southern Gothic, femininity is "shameful and obscene" (Perry 43). The nameless narrator in "Like That" and Frances in "Wunderkind" both attempt to challenge feminine gender roles, but with limited success. Just as the narrator will not be able to stop the inevitable

tide of femininity that will begin with her period, Frances will most likely be unable to find a place for herself in the world of women given the fact that she has tasted the world of men through her musical talent. What awaits these two girls is a life of loneliness, alienation and abjection. Frances will most likely become another Mrs. Bilderbach, while the nameless narrator another nameless southern woman. Both will, in their own ways, always remain queer and grotesque outsiders, because both have been awakened to the possibilities of a genderless, or at least gender equal, world. They have experienced the cruelty of adulthood, the torment of adolescence, and the unstable in-betweenness of liminality. They have seen the ladder on the other side of the glass ceiling but know they will be unable to break it.

### CHAPTER 3: THE QUEER AND GROTESQUE IN “COURT IN THE WEST EIGHTIES” AND “THE ORPHANAGE”

As illustrated in the previous two chapters, McCullers’s families consist mostly of queer individuals, especially queer adolescents. When these characters come together to form families, they subvert normative family units and suggest that there is an infinite number of ways to define family. McCullers’s families are both sophisticated and bizarre, and this is also reflected in the two short stories that I will analyze in this chapter. “Court in the West Eighties” is set in New York and tells the story of an eighteen-year-old teenager who searches for a family while gazing out of her window, which faces a court inside an apartment complex. The second story, “The Orphanage,” is about a gothic, disturbing orphanage that is more like another “gallery of grotesques” (Evans “The Case” 125) than a refuge for children and adolescents without families. The protagonists in both stories embody loneliness, abandonment, abjection and the struggle to live in the changing South. Much like their geographical region, these adolescents are also in transition, maturing and growing in very painful ways.

Another similarity in the stories is the overriding presence of the gaze. In “The Orphanage,” it is directed at the orphans, while in “Court in the West Eighties” it focuses on the red-haired man. Much like in Alfred Hitchcock’s thriller *Rear Window* (1954) in which a photographer watches his neighbor’s lives through his apartment window with a pair of binoculars, the gaze in McCullers’s short story is meant to evoke gothic horror. However, McCullers also uses the gaze to explore the idea of the spectacle, of the observer and the observed, and the gendered power relations involved. In “The Orphanage,” McCullers focuses on curiosity; in “Court in the West Eighties,” she explores voyeurism. In *Visual and Other Pleasures*, Laura Mulvey emphasizes that both types of perception, curiosity and voyeurism, should be regarded as active; however, because they deal with the binary active/passive, they are also compatible with queer theory’s treatment of sexual pleasure (x).

### 3.1. “COURT IN THE WEST EIGHTIES”

This short story does not have a proper plot in the traditional sense, and is more like an impression, sketch or vignette that narrates the experiences of an eighteen-year-old nameless protagonist who lives in an apartment complex in the West Eighties, a mediocre part of New York City, and derives pleasure from peeking through her window and observing her neighbors. The story begins with the narrator discussing how she came to New York to go to college and how she moved into an apartment with a court so she could see other people. She is seeking employment in between classes, and as a result, has little time for friends. Like the other characters I examine in this thesis, she is a lonely loner who positions herself as an outcast and misfit by refusing to integrate into society. In fact, she mentions only one friend from her hometown who asks her to buy and send him books. She does so, but always reads them first.

One spring day when she becomes bored of reading, she gazes out of her window and becomes intrigued by a red-haired man who attracts her attention. She discovers his body and all of its details, and comments on how the lives of the residents have become more interesting with the warming of the weather. She starts noticing other neighbors and observes their lives as well; however, always as an outsider, at a distance. She is entertained by the emotionally-unstable cellist and the young couple expecting a baby. One day, there is nuisance in the court: the cellist’s loud instrument (and probably sexual noises) makes the pregnant woman uncomfortable who, in response, throws garbage out of her window and into the cellist’s room. The young couple lives one floor above the cellist, so while they are not able to see each other, the narrator can see everything from her own room. They can only hear one another, and the cellist indicates her disturbance by yelling. The narrator believes the red-haired man can put an end to this discomfort, but he does nothing.

The disintegration in the court is brought about by the “relationships” between its various members. The narrator, on the other hand, is more interested in the red-haired man, who for some reason she thinks can understand everyone in the court. To her, he is neat and clean; she idealizes him and believes he is perfect in every way. However, more trouble awaits the court. The spouse of the pregnant woman loses his job in the

middle of the spring and the couple's health, both mentally and physically, starts deteriorating. The narrator literally watches them starve. The young woman, despite being pregnant, does not eat or move adequately. The young man frequently yells at her and one day, he becomes particularly annoyed by the noise coming from the cellist's apartment. After making a scene, the young couple moves out which starts a series of ruptures among the court neighbors. After the incident, neither the narrator nor the red-haired man care for the court as they previously did. The red-haired man, whom the narrator incessantly expects will stop the tension between the cellist and the young couple, clearly fails and moves out as well. The narrator becomes obsessed with the fact that ultimately, she knows nothing about the red-haired man. As a result, she grows cold towards him and suddenly becomes uninterested and instead, starts thinking about the classes she will take next semester and the books she will read which, once again, become her way of escaping her dreary, lonely and isolated life.

### **3.1.1. A Family Portrait of Isolation**

This story is another good example of how McCullers depicts dysfunctional individuals and incomplete families. The narrator witnesses relationships that constantly fail, and the women in these relationships present two extremes. The cellist lives alone, is independent, and has sexual relations with whoever she desires (and is most likely a sex worker), which contrasts with the young married couple, who are in a committed monogamous relationship and are expecting a baby. Initially, they are happy. In fact, McCullers describes how they “would often sit on [the bed] Turkish fashion, facing each other, talking and laughing” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 23), gazing into each other's eyes. However, the situation changes when he loses his job and they start fighting. He is constantly yelling and she becomes silent. They start to starve, hungry for both love and food. The more impoverished they become, the more he screams and the more invisible she becomes.

In the winter, the court is gloomy, gothic and doomed, much like the haunted relationships in the apartment complex: “The court would be dark for the night, with the snow on the roof of the first floor down below, like a soundless pit that would never awaken” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 21). The residents do not talk to one another but



instead, watch each other through their windows. The only time they verbally communicate is when they yell or shout. Nevertheless, despite the anger and hostility, the narrator comes to see her neighbors as her family, and probably no more dysfunctional than the stifling one she left behind (we get the impression that she is from a small town and might even be southern herself). In fact, the residents drag their beds near their windows so they can be closer to each other, to watch each other and to feel some sort of human emotion and connection amidst the desolation. The narrator adds: “When you can see people sleep and dress and eat you get to feel that you understand them even if you don’t know their names” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 22).

The people in the court are lonely and clearly do not have much of a social life. Yet, they also derive pleasure from this voyeurism. The narrator even acquires a sense of vicarious usefulness, thinking through their problems and coming up with solutions, even though she never speaks to them or has any physical interaction with her neighbors: “You see all of us in the court saw each other sleep and dress and live out our hours away from work, but none of us ever spoke” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 26). Witnessing the lives of others also prompts introspection. As she comments, “it is hard to tell how you feel when you watch someone go hungry” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 25). They are all isolated—a natural outcome of urban living, especially in New York where people often remain anonymous and nameless like the narrator—and can merely bond with each other through their windows. As abject individuals, they are also queer, and thus deprived of warm, functional relationships with anyone. As Kristeva claims, they are “faint” and they “behold the breaking down of a world that has erased its borders: fainting away” (4).

In essence, McCullers recreates a southern dysfunctional family within a New York apartment courtyard. Distant and unable to communicate like functional human beings, they live around each other and intentionally avoid contact, as if they are afraid it will shatter the mental fantasies and impressions they have created of one another. This is certainly what happens when the narrator discovers how “imperfect” the red-haired man actually is—that he is far from the savior she makes him out to be. As the narrator emphasizes, “we were near enough to throw our food into each other’s windows .... And still we acted as strangers” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 26). Much like the southern

families in other McCullers short stories, like “Who Has Seen the Wind?” and “A Domestic Dilemma” for example, the members of this queer courtyard family are troubled, lonely and dissociated. There is also abundant poverty, domestic violence, sexuality, and alcoholism. Moreover, the court is full of grotesque figures, a gallery in fact, that watch over each other like small town southern neighbors. Thus the court functions as a microcosm of southern life, strange but distinct, in the world yet set apart from it, interested but apathetic. Much like the South, there is a feeling of restriction, depression and an “absolutely nothing to do”-ness (Cook 4). McCullers recreates this image in the court in this setting, which is a powerful statement—that one can be alone in a city of millions of people—especially given the assumed cosmopolitanism of New York. The court is surrounded by buildings, forcing confinement and resulting in disengaged, alienated, withdrawn and abject “southern” characters.

This short story, much like others written by McCullers, focuses on the cheapness of human life, especially during the 1930s, the Great Depression, when it is set. The narrator’s indifference towards the characters’ suffering, especially the starving pregnant woman, creates outrage in the reader. Moreover, little is said about why the cellist probably engages in sex work (as a means of survival in a harsh world, especially for women) and why the red-haired man turns to alcohol, spending his nights drinking from a bottle. The narrator states that it pains her to witness such suffering, especially the starvation, yet she does so, without any intervention. However, she is no better off herself, which explains why she is almost immune to this suffering: it was normalized during the Depression, when Americans did whatever they had to do to make it to the next day. Although there is an implicit power of the gaze that comes with voyeurism, the narrator is powerless. Not only is she a teenage girl, but she is also an unemployed student who does not have the money or the social status to end abuse or feed a starving couple. The situation is so dire that one of her classmates “wear[s] newspapers under his sweater all winter” because he does not own a coat. The narrator’s hometown friend, we learn, orders books because he cannot afford to attend college and is trying to educate himself (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 21-23). Hungriness is a constant theme in the short story—for food, for love, for knowledge and survival. In fact, the narrator even comments that “There was a queer sort of hungriness, for food and for other things, too, that I could not get rid of” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 21).

While “for other things” may signify sexual relations, and will be examined later in the chapter, the hungriness she denotes is clearly literal and figurative. It represents the young couple who cannot feed themselves—“their milk is cut down to a fourth of what they used to get and because I don’t see him eating (giving her the sandwich he goes out to get each evening at dinner time)” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 25). It also symbolizes their spiritual hunger, hopelessness and dying souls: She “just sits like that all day, not taking any interest in anything except the window sills where some of us keep our fruit” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 25). The hungrier the couple gets, the more shouting and yelling the narrator observes, as if they are using their remaining energy to destroy each other. Starvation renders them grotesque, and poverty brings with it a numbness and violence that McCullers normally locates in the South.

From the outside, the apartment building looks like the perfect place to live. The narrator describes a relatively decent building for the 1930s, including an elevator, a lobby with marble, and small but practical rooms, which makes the grotesque interior, and the fact that people are starving inside, all the more difficult to comprehend. The future looks grim, especially for the couple’s baby, and above all, life is cheap and worthless. The Great Depression was a time of great suffering, especially financially, and especially in the South. If the apartment complex represents a perpetual South, then it becomes the most abject of places, permanently in such an economically-deprived state. Nevertheless, the narrator, naively thinking that New York was somehow immune to poverty, cannot believe “someone could starve in such buildings [that] look almost rich (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 25).

### **3.1.2. Voyeurism and Power**

Erin Bell remarks that McCullers criticizes “gendered viewing practices” in this story, opening up a new window that defies the patriarchal vision of southern society (195). Instead of building her story around a male character watching and enjoying a female one, McCullers flips roles and has a sexually-awakened, eighteen-year-old adolescent watch and enjoy a man about whom she knows nothing. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger notes that for centuries, in art, men were the surveyors of women’s bodies. Women were the image or object to be looked at, and many even appreciated being looked at.

Additionally, many were nude in western art pieces, so this male gaze was a voyeuristic phallic gaze and also sexual in nature (47). It was also simultaneously sociopathic and fetishistic, and thus both queer and grotesque. As Bell expresses, McCullers inverts western “ways of seeing” by making her observer female and observed male (196).

The female narrator’s gaze is also sexual and “knowing,” suggesting the completion of the adolescent transition from innocence to experience. Her fetishistic peeping at the red-haired man is queer, grotesque and yet powerful in that she derives one-way pleasure from it (we assume the man does not know he is being observed, although this may not be the case given its status as a common activity in the apartment complex). Bell states that the changing seasons is an allegory for the narrator’s sexual awakening (196). Moreover, the narrator’s hunger for things she cannot name may be her sexual desire (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 21). What is clear is that she has sexual fantasies about the red-haired man. McCullers’s sentences describing this scene are full of double entendres. The narrator sees “his shoulders straight and muscular under his blue pajama jacket,” almost as if he were naked and sleeping in bed. Furthermore, her attention is drawn to his muscular shoulders even though he is wearing a jacket. She adds, “I could plainly see his neat blunt hands as they fondled the plants, carefully touching the roots and the soil” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 22). According to Bell, this denotes sexual intercourse: “The plants, while alluding to the spring’s fecundity, ... could also be simulacrum for the narrator’s body; she too would be ‘fondled’ by his ‘neat blunt hands’” (197). She watches the man in a focused way and finds his activity enjoyable. As the narrator declares, “Something about the man made me feel that I could stand there watching him all morning” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 22), thereby objectifying the man in the same way men have objectified women for millennia.

Another contrast is between the cellist and the young couple. Two different female images are created with these characters who never see each other directly. Their rooms are on different floors and only the narrator can see the two rooms at the same time. There are moments when these characters communicate by yelling at each other, but never face to face. Consequently, the reader analyzes their behavior via the narrator’s explanations and observations, adding to her voyeurism (of women this time). On one hand, there is the educated, independent woman who lives alone and has male company

whenever she likes. She plays the cello and her music intensifies when the young man loses his job. On the other hand, there is the pregnant woman who merely expects her husband to feed her, like a baby bird. She does not have a voice, even when the man yells at her. She is mistreated and is domestically abused. She is palpably passive, and probably of a lower class and educational level, especially when compared to the cellist who is able to do anything as she desires.

The cellist reacts aggressively when she faces an expected situation, such as the orange peel encounter. The young couple throw their orange peels out of the window and the wind blows them into the cellist's room. The cellist becomes furious and yells at them. Even though her cello playing is just as annoying to the couple, especially the pregnant woman, they do not have the same spoiled reaction as the cellist. As Bell adds, the cello playing assumes a queer meaning if one interprets the instrument as representing a phallus (198): "Late in the day she would sit facing the court with her cello, her knees spread wide apart to straddle the instrument, her skirts pulled up to the thighs so as not to strain the seams" (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 24). This public spectacle, which the whole court is able to view through their windows, signifies her female power over the male penis, and challenges the young man's apparent uselessness and impotence. He is not capable of feeding his pregnant wife or having sex with her. The hungriness brought about by unemployment, along with the frustration of not having sex, leads to a thick fog of tension and distress.

The cellist is a strong female figure who is in stark contrast with the powerless young man. McCullers creates a strong opposition here that challenges gender roles, especially in this microcosm of the South. Life may be cheap, queer and transgressive, but it certainly benefits women. The men in the complex are ineffectual; the women wield true power, particularly over bodies—their own and others—rendering them grotesque yet oddly desirable. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar state in their article "Fighting for Life," the 1920s and 1930s were decades when women entered the public sphere. These New Women had suffrage, were admitted into universities and were employed. This created a powerful feminist female image in society, and in literature, it was "a healthy impulse to depict women actively fighting their male opponents rather than just passively resisting them" (147). McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café*

includes women who are “physically powerful enough to inaugurate and sustain combat against men” (Gilbert and Gubar 147). However, as Gilbert and Gubar emphasize, this power is portrayed as grotesque or freakish (147). Likewise, the cellist, who assumes male power for herself, is depicted as the source of the disintegration in the court. People become uncomfortable due to the constant fighting and tension between the musician and young couple, and everything starts to unravel as a result.

In this context, the balloon man the cellist brings home and hangs from her lampshade is both ridiculous and symbolically powerful. Seen from the whole court, it “dangles” with its “long balloon” body “and a round small one for the head, painted with a grinning mouth. It was a brilliant green, the crepe paper legs were pink” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 26). Not only does this balloon man mock and trivialize masculinity, but it also suggests the irrelevance of men. For the cellist, they are a form of entertainment and probably money. She is not emotionally invested in the opposite sex which, when combined with the same-sex female-female voyeurism in the short story, suggests a possible homoerotic subtext. Moreover, the balloon man, with his ridiculously colored, dangling body and silly face further objectifies and emasculates men, and might be an indirect jab at her useless, unemployed neighbor. Furthermore, the balloon man also is akin to blow-up sex dolls, which are usually female, thus reinforcing the objectification of men, and not women, in this short story.

### **3.2. “THE ORPHANAGE”**

Arguably McCullers’s most gothic story, “The Orphanage” is much like “Court in the West Eighties” in that there is not a strong plot and the characters are not well-developed, leaving much to the reader’s imagination, which heightens the grotesqueness of the work. It begins with a very scary description of a gloomy orphanage in the middle of what is implied to be a small southern town. At least it seems this way to the seven-year-old nameless narrator who sees it on her way to her house with her grandmother. Because of her deep curiosity and in spite of her fear, she tries to imagine what life is like inside the orphanage. Since she is not able to see the building and the orphans inside due to the fence around that surrounds the building, she does not have a very pleasant impression about what looks like a haunted house.

The narrator mentions Hattie, a black girl, whom she calls her “initiator” and who is allegedly George Washington’s niece. She is black because, as she informs the narrator, her mother kissed a black boy, but there is much more in this childish explanation than meets the eye. Most likely, she is a biracial child with a white mother and black father and perhaps she is related to George Washington on her mother’s side. Another possibility given the interracial relations of the antebellum South is that she may be a black Washington descendent. Slave owning Founding Fathers, such as Thomas Jefferson, were known to have sired children with their slaves (Sally Hemings in Jefferson’s case), who went on to become members of the African American community since they were unaccepted by the white community due to the one-drop rule (Nicolaisen 99). While this explanation may be a little more farfetched, it is plausible given the violent, exploitive racial history of the South and its prominence in Southern Gothic works, especially those by William Faulkner.

In any case, Hattie is a relatively poor girl with many wrong impressions about life probably because she is so young, just “nine or ten” years old. Hattie, Tit (the narrator’s cousin, nicknamed after a breed of bird) and the narrator go to Hattie’s house where she shows them a bottle in which there is a preserved fetus. Hattie claims the fetus is an orphan, which in a sense it is since like orphans in the traditional sense, it is abject, alienated, and parentless. The horrific bottle scares the narrator and she is so frightened and terrorized by the event that she avoids “her initiator” and has nightmares about the bottle and the orphanage.

The rest of the story depicts an experience the narrator has when she is eleven years old. The narrator becomes more involved with the orphans when her grandmother is assigned a duty by the orphanage’s board of directors. Three orphans start attending the narrator’s school, and one day the narrator visits the orphanage with her grandmother and actually likes it. It is not the spooky, gothic, haunted house and “gallery of grotesques” she imagined. In fact, she finds the atmosphere quite cozy and warm. Although the narrator defines this visit as “awkward” given her initial, incorrect impression, she rids herself of her prejudices and even befriends an orphan named Susie, which finally gives her a sense of belonging.

### 3.2.1. Implications of the Curious Female Gaze

Phillips notes that orphans, both literal and figurative (Hugh and Constance, for example) are McCullers's embodiments of spiritual isolation (174). The orphanage is their haunted castle, their gothic home, where abandoned and lonely children cling to each other for survival. There are no parents to save them or rid them of their abjection, so the orphans form their own "family." As a result, the orphanage is the perfect setting to narrate not only the desperation that characterizes Southern Gothic literature, but also McCullers's broad definition of family. The orphanage symbolizes all of these sentiments, and there are a number of gothic devices in the short story—in particular imagery—that reinforce them. When the narrator passes by the orphanage, she allegedly hears "the sound of unseen voices and sometimes a noise like that of clanging metal. ... The sounds behind the board fence seemed tinged with menace in the fading light, and the iron picket gate in front was to the touch of a finger bitter cold. ... The gloom of the grassless yard and even the gleams of yellow light from the narrow windows," make the narrator afraid of this mysterious and unsettling place (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 49). That these sights and sounds actually exist is unlikely, but in this case, just like in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, it is perception and the horror that the mind creates that is more important. For the narrator, the dreary, gloomy and horrifying orphanage represents all of her internalized ghosts, demons and fears, one of which may be ending up an orphan herself. This is a possibility because she is being raised by her elderly grandmother, and McCullers's does not mention her parents in the short story, who may in fact be dead.

The narrator's constant curiosity and gaze generate readings that evoke the myth of Pandora. Out of curiosity, Pandora opens the box or jar in Epimetheus's house that is filled with all types of miseries, letting the evil out (Lachs 341). Pandora has a relentless will, or curiosity, to know what is inside and according to the myth, her gaze into the box or jar changes the world forever. Similarly, the narrator in "The Orphanage" has a probing, yet potentially dangerous, interest in orphans and orphanages, and one that has the ability to change her life—her world—forever (which is exactly what the fetal encounter does). She even strolls around the orphanage, acknowledging the power of this gaze: "The yard was surrounded by a wrought iron fence, and the orphans were seldom to be seen there when you stopped on the sidewalk to gaze inside. The back



yard, on the other hand, was for a long time a secret place to me, the Home was on a corner, and a high board fence concealed what went on inside” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 49). Her curiosity prompts her to enter the orphanage one day, when she discovers that the place is not as scary as she imagines. “The first visit was awkward. Girls of all ages were playing different games. Confusion made me see the yard full of children as an unassorted whole” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 52). In this sense, the narrator does not have to suffer in the same way Pandora did, but McCullers certainly compensates for it with another jar, housing another orphan, the preserved fetus.

Laura Mulvey elaborates on the curiosity element in this myth and suggests that “[c]uriosity projects itself onto, and into space through its drive to investigate and uncover secrets, carrying with it connotations of transgression and danger” (Mulvey, *Fetishism* 60). In this sense, the narrator in “The Orphanage” might be acting out suppressed, transgressive and dangerous behavior through her curiosity about the orphans and their home. Initially, this space and its inhabitants were an enigma; the orphanage was an attractive, yet repulsive, abject building full of lonely, and unwanted, children and adolescents. This impression was amplified by the gothic and grotesque “dead pickled baby” that the protagonist sees in Hattie’s house. According to Hattie, it belongs to her brother, who is studying to be a pharmacist; however this seems like an oversimplified explanation given by a child. While it may be a scientific specimen, it could also belong to her mother, and thus be a miscarried, stillborn or aborted sibling (during the illegal period, pregnancies were often terminated in the backrooms of drug stores by pharmacists) (Reagan 44). Or it could belong to another woman, and Hattie’s brother may have performed an abortion and kept the fetus out of his own curiosity.

Ultimately, the source/owner of the fetus is not that relevant. It is the horror and terror that it evokes that is significant. This is heightened when Hattie claims that the fetus belongs to an orphan (and thus could be the product of rape, miscarriage, abortion or still birth). The narrator immediately connects her fear and curiosity concerning the fetus to her fear and curiosity concerning the orphanage: “Did I believe that in that gloomy, gabled house there were shelves with rows of these eerie bottles? Probably yes... I kept close to my Grandmother when in the late afternoon we passed by the Home” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 51). This impression changes when the narrator

discovers that the orphans are children, just like her. As Mulvey conveys, “Curiosity shifts, with this new dimension, from a literal desire to see with one’s own eyes to the thrill of deciphering an enigma” (*Fetishism* 61). The narrator may think that she has in fact deciphered this enigma, and may be at peace with herself, but McCullers leaves the reader with many disturbing unanswered questions, especially about the fetus which remains a fetish, especially to Hattie.

An awkward encounter at the orphanage, near the end of the story, adds to these unanswered questions. During a visit with her grandmother, the narrator is approached by a girl who asks the narrator about her father. Before the narrator can answer, the little orphan recounts that hers “was a walker on the railroad” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 53). During the Great Depression, railroad walkers were homeless vagabonds who, having no place to go, rode the rails. They travelled from place to place on freight trains, illegally jumping on to boxcars they hoped would take them to a better place (Fox and Maxted 166). The tramp character is significant in Southern Gothic literature, and is used extensively not only by McCullers (in “A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud.” and in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* for example), but also by Tennessee Williams (Big Daddy’s hobo father dies while trying to jump on a freight train in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*) and Truman Capote (in “Children on their Birthdays”). These individuals, who are routeless and rootless, not only dismantle the Old South’s myths of family and stability, but as seers of the New South, they often see more clearly than southerners who are rooted, routed and thus blind to their surroundings. In other words, their wandering, often in transient and transitory places (like cafes, and train and bus stations, where one will never encounter the same group of people again) brings with it self-knowledge and a deeper perception of life.

In the case of this orphan, her father’s demise as “a walker on the railroad” also symbolizes their abject poverty and hopelessness. When he dies, she becomes parentless, doomed to live her life in another transient place until she reaches maturity, the age of eighteen. Moreover, the fact that the narrator is unable to respond to the question, and is silenced by the orphan’s own narrative, suggests that she may be one step away from the same fate. That she too may be doomed to life in an orphanage if her

grandmother dies. This connects the narrator to the children in a powerful way, adding to her terror and nervousness about her surroundings.

Hattie, who does not have a last name and claims to be a descendant of George Washington, is another symbol of the New South. Not only does she have blond hair and wear Native American clothing (like Catherine in Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp*), which clearly strengthens the theory that she is biracial, if not multiracial, and that her lineage may be traced back to the first president, but she is also the narrator's "initiator" into the world of reproduction, which has obvious homoerotic overtones. Like other Southern Gothic characters (Miss Amelia in McCullers's *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and Dolly from *The Grass Harp* immediately come to mind), Hattie has healing powers, and out of poverty, asks for money in return. This grotesque child is frightening in many ways, most notably her precocious knowledge of the human body, its ailments and its treatments. Moreover, her house is "uncanny," gothic and spooky like Hattie and her family. Although her grandmother does not want the narrator to spend time with her (possibly because she is non-white and/or poor and/or queer), "in the dual bondage of guilt and fear [she] follows her around the neighborhood" (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 50). Here, bondage is an important choice of words, and one that emphasizes the queerness and homoeroticism of the situation.

Despite her fears, the narrator forces herself to come to terms with the fetus and the orphanage, both of which terrify her. As Mulvey explains, "The female figure is not only driven by transgressive curiosity, to open the box, but is able to look at the supposed horror of those aspects of the female body that are repressed under patriarchal culture" (Mulvey, *Fetishism* 61). To the narrator, the orphanage in particular is a mysterious box, and she confronts it head on by visiting it with her grandmother. She releases her horror of the female body (as symbolized by the fetus) and thus she holds that patriarchal society has on her. In her own way, the narrator is a young rebel. The result is life-changing because even though this looks quite simple, what the narrator does is challenge socially constructed boundaries that are already shaping her mind (permissible/taboo, acceptable/abject, clean/dirty, pure/sexual, male/female). As a result, she acquires what Mulvey calls an "active look," which overthrows "prohibition" (*Fetishism* 61). Binaries, such as active/ passive, no longer have meaning, boundaries

become vague, and gender roles are blurred. Just like with voyeurism, curiosity loses its masculine veneer through such deconstruction (Mulvey, *Visual x*). In a sense, just like these characters, it is queered.

### 3.2.2. The Bottled Fetus, Hattie and Gothic Symbolism

The “dead pickled baby,” which is a main focus of the short story, has multi-layered meanings. One of these layers is its literal meaning. The fetus radiates ideas of loneliness, isolation and detachment as a baby is supposed to stay in its mother’s uterus until it is born alive. Instead, the jarred fetus symbolizes a rotten family structure since it now denotes a forgotten, abandoned, decayed, abject being that did not even receive a “Christian burial.” The fetus also invokes Constance in “Breath from the Sky.” As Phillips notes, Constance “is orphaned from her family not by parental death, but by her own invalidism” (174). Constance and the preserved orphan-fetus share a common fate: they are in a perpetual state of spiritual, emotional and physical isolation. They are grotesque freakish objects that lie on the periphery of the family, but never really belong.

The fetus may also symbolize the twisted ideals of the Old South, and the cultural and historical anachronisms of the New South, enclosed in a jar or bottle. In other words, the social and racial burdens and secrets of the past and their ghostly haunting of the present. Like Pandora’s Box, the jar should not be opened. Otherwise the violence, corruption and evilness of the past may spoil the present. As McCullers illustrates, even gazing at it, like looking at Medusa, can cause irreparable damage. In this case, some aspects of the past are better off dead, especially the “old feudal order” of the flawed, decadent and morally empty Old South—a cauldron of racial, sexual and economic dominance enjoyed by the white majority (Cobb 132). The unopened jar represents the sealing and burial of the past, and stands for change, which will transform the South and ideally lead to progress.

In spite of, or maybe because of, her grotesque queerness, Hattie, the magical bi/multi-racial pre-adolescent girl, embodies this change and hope for the future. In “Politics in the Kitchen: Carson McCullers, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Surrealist History,” Yaeger

indicates that McCullers also offers elements of this “surrealist or fantasmatic history” in her novel *The Member of the Wedding* through the African American servant Berenice (112). The black housekeeper, much like Hattie, is a grotesque, abject, liminal figure with her glaring blue glass eye and unmistakable gaze. She has power over the human body, an uncanny ability to heal, and a way with men. Likewise, her “ambiguously” progressive and liberating behavior as a transgressive “initiator” or eye-opener balances the horror and terror of the white world (117), which was particularly disturbing in the pre-civil rights era.

Like Berenice, Hattie also represents common sense and the voice of reason in an absurd world. The fact that she believes she is related to George Washington may also indicate the reality that the United States was built by African Americans, just as much as by its white, male citizenry. By showing the narrator the fetus, Hattie prompts the narrator to think about the lives and fates of those who have been cast off by the white world, including non-whites and in this case, orphans. That Hattie is a black female non-normative character is also significant, for in literature involving fantastic quests, initiators and guides are usually normative white males.

When Hattie does face racism and prejudice, it is not from children, who are members of the New South, but rather adults, who symbolize the Old South and its rigid and wicked rules and codes. The narrator’s grandmother, a popular matron in the community who is probably well-off since she participates in charity work at the orphanage, warns the narrator not to associate with Hattie, who she sees as an inappropriate playmate. There is a huge class and racial gap between the narrator’s and Hattie’s families. This makes McCullers’s “attack on the familiar” (Yaeger 112) through George Washington even more provocative and queer: a black working class girl with a way with dead fetuses and voodoo-like healing powers is claiming this lineage, not the narrator, which would be more believable. However, Hattie validates her claim as more than a possibility by reminding her white friend of the sins of the past. Hattie tries to explain, in her own childish and incomplete way through scraps of information, the reality that in the Old South, the status of a child followed the status of the mother. In other words, a child was automatically a slave if his/her mother was a slave, regardless of the paternity (in this case, a white plantation master): “If a girl, said

Hattie, kissed a boy she turned into a colored person, and when she was married her children were colored, too. Only brothers were excepted from this law” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 50).

As Yaeger observes, McCullers often portrays racialized and wronged characters such as Berenice and Hattie as part of an unrealistic or hallucinatory atmosphere in order to heighten their presence as gothic ghosts (115–116). Hattie and her house feel like a fantasy to the narrator: “I don’t remember where Hattie lived, but one passageway, one room, have an uncanny clarity. Nor do I know how I happened to go to this room” (McCullers, *Mortgaged* 50). Everything about Hattie is unclear. Readers are even led to believe that she does not exist, or exists only in the narrator’s mind. In fact, she might be a figment of the narrator’s imagination, like an imaginary friend who surfaces to help her cope with a traumatic experience (the loss of her parents) and move onto the next stage of development: adolescence, sexual awareness, and the transition from innocence to experience.

## CONCLUSION

Carson McCullers is a prominent Southern Gothic novelist, short story writer and playwright who helped define the genre. Her novels have been studied by numerous writers and critics, her works have been made into films, and the play adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding* has remained in production for decades, testifying to the continued popularity of her work. Nevertheless, her short fiction has remained understudied and overlooked, which is illustrated by the limited nature of the secondary literature. This thesis is an effort to start filling this gap, especially with respect to our understanding of the gothic nature of her short stories and how they depict grotesque and queer adolescents struggling in a changing world and with shifting definitions of family during the interwar years and beyond.

Chapter 1 mainly focuses on the protagonists in “The Haunted Boy” and “Breath from the Sky” and deals with fear-driven adolescents who are horrified of being abandoned by their families, and in particular their mothers, because of death. The chapter examines the grotesque and queer adolescents, Hugh and Constance, who are suffering from isolation, loneliness and confusion over gender roles and sexuality. Chapter 2, which examines “Like That” and “Wunderkind,” analyzes the lives and family structures of two girls on the cusp of adolescence who reject binaries and assumptions regarding heteronormative sexuality and the female body. In particular, these grotesque girls challenge the male-dominated patriarchal system through their queer behavior and class for a revision of the social codes and norms of America. The final chapter of this thesis, Chapter 3, expands my analysis of loneliness and abjection as functions of the Southern Gothic “family” through the (pre)adolescent characters in “Court in the West Eighties” and “The Orphanage.” This chapter examines the characters’ grotesque, fetishistic and curious fascination with voyeurism, its connection to family-building, and the ways in which it empowers them as young women living in New York (a microcosm of the South) and the South itself. All of these stories share an overriding theme: how the position of young girls and women were in a state of flux after World War I, especially in the South, but that this was not necessarily something to be feared. In other words, that with destruction comes renewal, and that for women, the future (the New South) had to be brighter than the past (the Old South).

Studies of McCullers's writing have overwhelmingly focused on the reflection of her personal life in her works, which can be problematic because it can lead to speculation without proof and the psychoanalysis of authors. I have intentionally avoided this kind of analysis, and have only mentioned biographical facts when absolutely necessary. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that authors usually write about what they know and may consciously or subconsciously include personal detail in their works. McCullers was proud to be southern and reflected this in her choice of geography, characters, and the struggle they had to endure. Even when set in other parts of the United States, her works retain a southernness to them through the themes they explore—abjection, poverty, the burden of the past on the present, family dysfunction, grotesqueness and queerness—which, perhaps because of the distinct history of the South, are more vividly and vibrantly experienced in this region of the country than anywhere else. The South, with its sweltering heat, damp, sticky weather, flora and fauna, desolation, and isolation, actually becomes a character in most of her works, prompting protagonists and antagonists to feel, and act upon, a wide range of emotions.

Interestingly, the extremes in the southern climate also shape the plots of McCullers's fiction. This is certainly the case in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* where there is a heatwave followed by snow, foreshadowing a time of confusion and the inevitable doom of Miss Amelia. Lightning and thunder underscore violence and discoveries of terrible family secrets, and the heat infuriates characters, making them sensitive, and usually intolerant, of the simplest things. The weather also reminds them of their loneliness, isolation and abjection, especially in small southern towns where gossip runs rampant, and the fact that they are probably too poor to escape such a barren and oppressive landscape. In "Like That," the narrator protagonist and her sister, Marian, share a bed. Because of the heat, Marian keeps on pushing the narrator to the other side of the bed. However, the narrator thinks that this action is because Marian does not love her. Thus the South, and its extreme climate, has the ability to warp the most basic and innocent of human actions and emotions, rendering them grotesque and incomprehensible, especially to children and adolescents who are trying to understand their surroundings. Again, in the same short story, the family spends a great deal of time on the porch, drinking iced tea together in the evenings because of the heat. While in most families this would be a form of bonding, in Southern Gothic such moments



always take a wrong turn, resulting in fighting and the disintegration of relationships rather than empathy and appreciation. McCullers sustains such southern settings even when her works are not technically set in the South. In “Court in the West Eighties,” the setting is a New York apartment complex where residents literally see each other through their windows. This resembles small southern town life, with neighbors spying and prying into each other’s business, not verbally with gossip in this case but with their voyeuristic gaze. However, unlike close-knit southern communities, this is a place where characters witness heartbreaking situations, but do not offer help. Southern hospitality does not exist in this setting, prompting the reader to question whether or not it actually exists at all, or if it is just a façade for the violent, inhumane history of the South.

Louis D. Rubin Jr. has claimed that McCullers’s short stories do not adequately address her era and rarely touch upon events of the period in the same way that her novels do. I believe that this is an incorrect oversight. As argued in my thesis, her short stories are intricate portraits of the interwar years and beyond. Not everyone was directly involved in a movement, and just like today, it would be inaccurate to depict such a world. Yet, everyone, and especially children and adolescents, were experiencing the changes of a rapidly evolving country that itself was shifting from innocence to experience, particularly after fighting two world wars. This is the world that McCullers depicts. The definition of family, gender roles, and “southern values” were in a state of flux because the nation was too. It was a time of great change, when history was in the process of being written through the events of the Great Depression, World War II, and the post-war era, and McCullers had the foresight to depict it in a timeless way that retains its universality, even in the twenty-first century. The struggles she portrays transcend time because they are human struggles that have existed since antiquity. Inequality, physical pain, hunger, unemployment, abjection, alcoholism and desolation, for example, are problems that are both specific, and not specific, to the South, to the United States, and to the modern era.

In McCullers’s first major work *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), which she wrote when she was just twenty-three years old, she creates a southern microcosm where she examines issues like poverty, loneliness, love, friendship, gender inequality and a lack

of education. This work contains characters whom southern society would have called “grotesque” at the time—mutes, mentally and physical challenged people, and tomboys. Rather than demeaning and debasing them like normates were prone to do, she made them into heroes and heroines, using them to narrate the difficulties of the life in the South and the fact that these individuals were not grotesque—the South was—and they were just trying to survive, against the odds, in a cruel world. Likewise, domestic violence and loveless marriages are addressed in “A Domestic Dilemma,” “Who Has Seen the Wind?” and “Instant of the Hour After.” Human peculiarities, loneliness and isolation are covered in “The Jockey,” “Art and Mr. Mahoney,” “A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud.” and “The Sojourner.”

McCullers’ short Southern Gothic fiction offers a grotesque South full of non-normative, abject and queer characters who challenge the most sacred mythical values of their society. Odd family structures and members are an indispensable part of her stories, especially those that include children and teenagers. Adolescence is a grotesque time, even for the most “normal” among us, and it becomes a nightmare if the individual does not fit into the strict definitions society places on bodies. The stories I examine in this thesis all focus on dysfunctional, non-existent and non-traditional families, and the adolescents who struggle to compensate for it. Since Southern Gothic works never have happy endings (by definition the gothic is about death, despair and decay), what they end up with is more non-normative relationships. This makes the adolescents in the stories even more pitiful and grotesque. Moreover, the relationships they form are usually deeply queer in that they defy and question traditional southern moral values, social norms, gender codes and “settled opinions.” This is why, as I have illustrated, queer theory, which deals with the deconstruction of hegemonic binaries to derive meaning out of abjection and the non-normative margins, is the most appropriate framework to examine McCullers’s unusual adolescents. The queer theory of Kristeva and Mulvey also explain the female gaze of curiosity and voyeurism as seen in “Court in the West Eighties” and “The Orphanage.” The constant queer peeping of these two nameless women is empowering because it places them in subject “decider” positions, which usually belongs to men. Not only does the act of looking subvert binaries such as active/passive, innocent/abject, and male/female, but it also renders women, and not men, the (anti)heroes and survivors of these short stories.

The gothic is also very compatible with this queer theoretical framework because in essence, the gothic is always queer. In “The Haunted Boy,” Hugh is afraid that he will find his mother dead, in a pool of her own blood in the bathtub, when he comes home from school. This disrupts and disturbs the 1950s image of the perfect suburban mother, with milk and cookies in hand, waiting for her child to dismount the school bus. Instead, McCullers twists this bucolic image into a whirlwind of red, black and white, colors that represent blood, death and the end of innocence. In “Breath from the Sky,” color is utilized to symbolize sickness, health, freedom and sadness. In addition, dying flowers are inserted to describe the relationship between Constance and her mother. In “Wunderkind,” Frances sees nightmares that include the circling male faces of her teachers and Heime, a friend of whom she is jealous. In “The Orphanage,” there is a jar containing a dead preserved fetus and a spooky haunted building. Violence, abuse and exploitation are also undercurrents in this short story, just as they are in “Like That” and “Court in the West Eighties.”

Adolescence not only complements McCullers’s focus on the grotesque and gothic, but also the social commentary she is trying to make about the South. Her adolescents are undergoing painful years of change and confusion, transitioning from innocence to experience, and thus are symbolic of the same “growing pains” in the South. In “Like That,” the narrator is grotesque for many reasons, one of which is her naïve belief that she can stop the progress of her body. She presupposes that she can control her bodily functions, in particular menstruation, but realizes that it is impossible, much like stopping what McCullers saw as the inevitable progress and change of the South. Even though change might be frightening, like the dead fetus and haunted house in “The Orphanage,” it can be emancipating, especially when demons are confronted head-on. With enough bravery and willpower, change is always possible.

Adolescence also represents maturation, responsibility and physical and psychological development. Likewise, the New South is also maturing, redefining its responsibilities and relationships with minorities and women, and changing physically and psychologically, especially in terms of attitudes. The patriarchy, as McCullers predicts in “Wunderkind” and “Court in the West Eighties,” will gradually dissolve, giving way to strong women who, rejecting their stifling rules, will try to make their own way in the

world. They will work in a range of professions, including as classical musicians (which McCullers was unable to do), and will be sexually liberated, even if their sexual expressions (voyeurism and multiple partners) disturb the neighbors. The family will also invariably transform to accommodate these new southerners. In fact today, more American families resemble the so-called dysfunctional blended families of Southern Gothic literature than the mythic nuclear family comprised of a heterosexual married couple with their two children and two pets.

In her short fiction, Carson McCullers produced strong and vulnerable adolescent characters who rebel against norms imposed on them by society. They face challenges such as loneliness, isolation, abjection, abandonment, and emotional burdens and traumas. Nevertheless, they stand up to the social codes of the South and symbolize change and hope for the future. Their struggles are timeless and universal, which is why today, McCullers's queer southern relationships, empowered women, grotesque adolescents and misfits can be found in everything from Hollywood movies, to television dramas, to contemporary works of literature.

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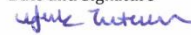

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## APPENDIX 1: ORIGINALITY REPORT

	<b>HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES MASTER'S THESIS ORIGINALITY REPORT</b>
<b>HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AMERICAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE DEPARTMENT</b>	
Date: 19/06/2018	
<p>Thesis Title : Loneliness, Isolation and Sexuality: The Portrayal of Adolescents in Carson McCullers' Short Fiction.</p> <p>According to the originality report obtained by my thesis advisor by using the Turnitin plagiarism detection software and by applying the filtering options checked below on 19/06/2018 for the total of 82 pages including the a) Title Page, b) Introduction, c) Main Chapters, and d) Conclusion sections of my thesis entitled as above, the similarity index of my thesis is 3 %.</p> <p>Filtering options applied:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Approval and Declaration sections excluded</li> <li>2. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Bibliography/Works Cited excluded</li> <li>3. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Quotes excluded</li> <li>4. <input type="checkbox"/> Quotes included</li> <li>5. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Match size up to 5 words excluded</li> </ol> <p>I declare that I have carefully read Hacettepe University Graduate School of Social Sciences Guidelines for Obtaining and Using Thesis Originality Reports; that according to the maximum similarity index values specified in the Guidelines, my thesis does not include any form of plagiarism; that in any future detection of possible infringement of the regulations I accept all legal responsibility; and that all the information I have provided is correct to the best of my knowledge.</p> <p>I respectfully submit this for approval.</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: flex-end;"> <div style="width: 60%;"> <p><b>Name Surname:</b> <u>Ufuk Tutucu</u></p> <p><b>Student No:</b> <u>N11122124</u></p> <p><b>Department:</b> <u>American Culture and Literature</u></p> <p><b>Program:</b> <u>American Culture and Literature</u></p> </div> <div style="width: 35%; text-align: right;"> <p>19/06/2018 Date and Signature </p> </div> </div>	
<p><b><u>ADVISOR APPROVAL</u></b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">APPROVED.</p> <div style="text-align: center;">   <hr style="width: 100%; border: 0.5px solid black;"/> <p>Assoc. Prof. Dr. Tanfer Emin Tunç</p> </div>	



HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ  
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ  
YÜKSEK LİSANS TEZ ÇALIŞMASI ORJİNALLİK RAPORU

HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ  
SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ  
AMERİKAN KÜLTÜRÜ VE EDEBİYATI ANABİLİM DALI BAŞKANLIĞI'NA

Tarih: 19/06/2018

Tez Başlığı : Yalnızlık, Tecrit ve Cinsellik: Carson McCullers'ın Öykülerinde Ergenlerin Betimlenmesi.

Yukarıda başlığı gösterilen tez çalışmamın a) Kapak sayfası, b) Giriş, c) Ana bölümler ve d) Sonuç kısımlarından oluşan toplam 82 sayfalık kısmına ilişkin, 19/06/2018 tarihinde tez danışmanım tarafından Turnitin adlı intihal tespit programından aşağıda işaretlenmiş filtrelemeler uygulanarak alınmış olan orijinallik raporuna göre, tezimin benzerlik oranı % 3 'tür.

Uygulanan filtrelemeler:

- 1-  Kabul/Onay ve Bildirim sayfaları hariç
- 2-  Kaynakça hariç
- 3-  Alıntılar hariç
- 4-  Alıntılar dâhil
- 5-  5 kelimededen daha az örtüşme içeren metin kısımları hariç

Hacettepe Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Tez Çalışması Orijinallik Raporu Alınması ve Kullanılması Uygulama Esasları'nı inceledim ve bu Uygulama Esasları'nda belirtilen azami benzerlik oranlarına göre tez çalışmamın herhangi bir intihal içermediğini; aksinin tespit edileceği muhtemel durumda doğabilecek her türlü hukuki sorumluluğu kabul ettiğimi ve yukarıda vermiş olduğum bilgilerin doğru olduğunu beyan ederim.

Gereğini saygılarımla arz ederim.

19/06/2018

Tarih ve İmza

*Ufuk Tutucu*

Adı Soyadı: Ufuk Tutucu

Öğrenci No: N1122124

Anabilim Dalı: Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı

Programı: Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı


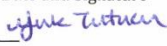

**DANIŞMAN ONAYI**

UYGUNDUR.

*Tanfer Emin Tunç*

Doç. Dr. Tanfer Emin Tunç

## APPENDIX 2: ETHICS BOARD WAIVER FORM FOR THESIS WORK

	<b>HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES ETHICS COMMISSION FORM FOR THESIS</b>
<b>HACETTEPE UNIVERSITY GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AMERICAN CULTURE AND LITERATURE DEPARTMENT</b>	
Date: 18/06/2018	
Thesis Title: Loneliness, Isolation and Sexuality: The Portrayal of Adolescents in Carson McCullers' Short Fiction.	
My thesis work related to the title above:	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Does not perform experimentation on animals or people.</li> <li>2. Does not necessitate the use of biological material (blood, urine, biological fluids and samples, etc.).</li> <li>3. Does not involve any interference of the body's integrity.</li> <li>4. Is not based on observational and descriptive research (survey, interview, measures/scales, data scanning, system-model development).</li> </ol>	
<p>I declare, I have carefully read Hacettepe University's Ethics Regulations and the Commission's Guidelines, and in order to proceed with my thesis according to these regulations I do not have to get permission from the Ethics Board/Commission for anything; in any infringement of the regulations I accept all legal responsibility and I declare that all the information I have provided is true.</p>	
I respectfully submit this for approval.	
	18/06/2018 Date and Signature 
<b>Name Surname:</b> Ufuk Tutucu <b>Student No:</b> N11122124 <b>Department:</b> American Culture and Literature <b>Program:</b> American Culture and Literature <b>Status:</b> <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> MA <input type="checkbox"/> Ph.D. <input type="checkbox"/> Combined MA/ Ph.D.	
<b><u>ADVISER COMMENTS AND APPROVAL</u></b>	
 Assoc. Prof. Dr. Tanfer Emin Tunç	





**HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ**  
**SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ**  
**TEZ ÇALIŞMASI ETİK KOMİSYON MUAFİYETİ FORMU**

**HACETTEPE ÜNİVERSİTESİ**  
**SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ**  
**AMERİKAN KÜLTÜRÜ VE EDEBİYATI ANABİLİM DALI BAŞKANLIĞI'NA**

Tarih: 18/06/2018

Tez Başlığı: Yalnızlık, Tecrit ve Cinsellik: Carson McCullers'in Öykülerinde Ergenlerin Betimlenmesi.

Yukarıda başlığı gösterilen tez çalışmam:

1. İnsan ve hayvan üzerinde deney niteliği taşımamaktadır,
2. Biyolojik materyal (kan, idrar vb. biyolojik sıvılar ve numuneler) kullanılmasını gerektirmemektedir.
3. Beden bütünlüğüne müdahale içermemektedir.
4. Gözlemsel ve betimsel araştırma (anket, mülakat, ölçek/skala çalışmaları, dosya taramaları, veri kaynakları taraması, sistem-model geliştirme çalışmaları) niteliğinde değildir.

Hacettepe Üniversitesi Etik Kurullar ve Komisyonlarının Yönergelerini inceledim ve bunlara göre tez çalışmamın yürütülebilmesi için herhangi bir Etik Kurul/Komisyon'dan izin alınmasına gerek olmadığını; aksi durumda doğabilecek her türlü hukuki sorumluluğu kabul ettiğimi ve yukarıda vermiş olduğum bilgilerin doğru olduğunu beyan ederim.

Gereğini saygılarımla arz ederim.

18/06/2018

Tarih ve İmza

*Ufuk Tutucu*

**Adı Soyadı:** Ufuk Tutucu

**Öğrenci No:** N11122124

**Anabilim Dalı:** Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı

**Program:** Amerikan Kültürü ve Edebiyatı

**Statüsü:**  Yüksek Lisans  Doktora  Bütünleşik Doktora

**DANIŞMAN GÖRÜŞÜ VE ONAYI**

*Doç. Dr. Tanfer Emin Tunç*

Doç. Dr. Tanfer Emin Tunç

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