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“I’d Rather Be a Boy Any Day”:

Gender Roles in Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

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Introduction

A gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve, stood looking in the doorway. She was dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes – so that at first glance she was like a very young boy. (McCullers 20)

The above excerpt is taken from the novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by American author Carson McCullers. Written in a direct and unadorned style reminiscent of her contemporary Ernest Hemingway, McCullers's novel struck an emotional chord with many readers when it was initially published in 1940. A key element in this context is McCullers's understanding of the human psyche in her portrayal of ordinary life. For example, the geographical setting of the novel is an ordinary mill town in the Deep South during the Depression in the late 1930s. In the background, the rise of fascism in Europe is constantly present as an ominous echo. McCullers presents us with a gallery of ordinary but original and enigmatic characters whose lives are intertwined on a number of levels. Still, they are far apart. This is the case with the character Mick Kelly - a young girl who is desperate to leave her rural surroundings but ultimately fails to do so due to factors beyond her control. In her writing, McCullers celebrates the free will of the individual in creating the character of Mick who endeavors to preserve her individuality even when the odds are stacked against her. Challenging the gender norms of her time, McCullers casts Mick in the role of a non-compromising loner struggling to maintain her independence in a conservative working class society. At the center of novel, is the deaf mute Mr. John Singer whose character serves as a nexus to the inhabitants of the mill town. In fact, all the lonely, tired and broken characters of the novel visit John Singer to

unburden themselves and share their thoughts and feelings. By doing so, they unintentionally ascribe to Singer almost god-like qualities that he does not possess.

In “A Mixture of Delicious and Freak” (1999), Rachel Adams contends that McCullers’s fiction is typically populated by freaks (552). This statement is especially true of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* where the sense of estrangement appears to be tangible on every page. Concentrating primarily on the social themes and racial animosity brought to light in the novel, a great number of literary critics have argued that the novel is to be considered primarily as a political work by McCullers. While it is undeniably true that the novel explores important topics such as race relations, gender norms, and social class, and that it thus functions as a critique of the power structures of the South in the late thirties, there are literary critics whose primary focus does not depend exclusively upon the novel’s ability to produce social awareness. According to this opposite school of thought, the chief object of literary interest can instead be found in the novel's exploration of deeper themes that reach beyond the sphere of politics. These critics argue that at its core, the novel functions as a dissection of universal and fundamental issues of the human condition. In this respect, psychological and theological concepts such as estrangement, angst and alienation are of key significance since they apply not only to one specific cluster of society but also to humanity as a whole. In the section entitled “Previous Research,” individual representatives of these two opposite schools of thought will be presented and explained in detail.

Focusing on the dichotomy between social conformity and individual ambition, this essay has as its central topic the study of gender roles and performativity. More specifically, my statement is that gender norms in Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* compromise Mick Kelly’s identity formation. Growing up in a conservative working class town where life choices and role models are limited for young women, Mick often finds it difficult to balance her own desires with the demands of the world around her as she

develops into a young woman. In order to confirm the validity of my thesis, I will examine how stereotypical gender norms affect Mick's personal development and her early sexual experiences.

Previous Research

In this section, I will attempt to outline the different ways in which Carson McCullers's work has been received by literary scholars and critics. In particular, I will be focusing on what common themes of her novels have been of main interest. Published in 1940 and dealing with topics such as race relations and gender issues, which were sensitive for its time and still are today, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* has unsurprisingly been the subject of extensive literary research. In *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers*, Lisa Logan states that shortly after its publication, McCullers's novel became highly regarded by critics who did not fail to combine their praise with comments on the author's relatively young age as she was only twenty-three at the time (2).

A common area of interest for a great number of critics has been to study McCullers's work in terms of binary oppositions or dichotomies such as normality vs. abnormality, white vs. black, heterosexuality vs. homosexuality. In creating a fictional world in which the main characters all share various forms of characteristic traits that lie beyond the limits of that which is or was considered to be normal and standard at the time in the rural South, McCullers paints an insightful portrait of the human psyche, which is, for example, the case regarding the character Mick Kelly.

According to Adams, McCullers's characters "suffer an alienation from their bodies that parallels their experiences of estrangement within and isolation from the society of others" (552). However, unlike those literary critics who favor the idea that the alienation

expressed in her novel is universal, Adams contends that the element of alienation as presented in McCullers's fiction can be understood, not only in psychological terms, but rather as a reflection of historical and political realities. According to Adams, an exclusively universal approach "ignores the historical specificity of her writing, in which freakish characters point to the untenability of normative concepts of gender and race at a moment when these categories were defined with particular rigidity" (552). Instead of solely focusing on the archetypal portrait of human alienation that several other critics have detected in her narrative, Adams argues that this pivotal element of alienation is expressed through the lenses of social suffering and social critique situated within the context of major historical events: the development of World War II, and the brewing dissatisfaction of racial and sexual minorities.

On several accounts, Adams challenges the conventional way of interpreting McCullers's novel as a mere psychological study of the human condition. With reference to traditional criticism, Adams states that even critics who recognize particular forms of race or gender-based oppression tend to connect them to "the variety and complexity of human isolation and the destructive repercussions of that alienation" (552). This argument opposes the interpretation of McCullers's work as essentially a representation of universal truths and instead favors the notion that the novel is primarily a social and political critique of the rural south. However, in this context, Rachel Adams is far from the only critic who observes a strong political voice in McCullers's narrative. In "Carson McCullers and Lillian Smith: The intersections of Gender and Race in the Jim Crow South" (2005), Constanze González Groba discusses similarities and differences between racial oppression and gender norms in the South of the 1930s. According to González Groba, McCullers is primarily an author with a clear political agenda, fighting for the underdog despite the odds. Fortunately, the social and psychological realities in her narrative are not altogether bereft of hope (572). As a remedy

for alienation, González Groba suggests that “fantasies in McCullers's fiction are the most significant way of envisioning alternatives to corporeal inequalities that create an atmosphere of alienation and claustrophobia” (573). González Groba states that the most important scenarios in her fiction are those in which characters of various races and social groups try to imagine a world that does not rely on hierarchical distinctions among persons for its social organization (575).

However, as noted earlier, all critics do not subscribe to the theory of a “political McCullers.” Oliver Evans, author of the 1966 biography *The Ballad of Carson McCullers*, contends that McCullers’s writing is characterized by loneliness, spiritual isolation and the absence of love. Evans suggests that there is a vaster, more universal truth in her writing and that her work should best be interpreted with a focus on its symbolism and allegories (143). In “The Achievement of Carson McCullers,” Evans advocates:

It is impossible to understand Mrs. McCullers’s work unless one realizes that she conceives of fiction chiefly as parable. The reader who concerns himself exclusively with the realistic level of her stories will never fully appreciate them, though he may be momentarily diverted. The narrative burden of her work is always secondary to the allegorical: she is in this sense a didactic writer, for she does not write to entertain but to teach, and what she has to teach are those truths about human nature that she has learned from her experience, which is profound, and from her observation, which, at the same time that it is compassionate, is penetrating to the point of clairvoyance. (“The Achievement” 301)

From a universal standpoint, Evans puts forward the notion that in the search for love and affinity, McCullers's characters ascribe qualities (good or bad) to one another based on their own fears and desires that are not necessarily there (156). According to Evans, the author's intention is to paint an allegoric picture of life containing the message that "while love is the only force that can unite men, love is never completely mutual and is subject to time, diminishing with the death of the love-object. The single consolation is that love, while it lasts, is beneficial to the lover, affording him temporary relief from his solitude" ("The Achievement" 303). Thus, Evans is of the opinion that the novel should be interpreted in terms of an allegory that is neither political nor religious; the novel's elements of social and racial realism, are characteristic of many southern novels of the era (*The Ballad* 48). Expressed in this fashion, Evans' contention is quite opposed to that of Adams who, with reference to the same racial and social inequities portrayed in the novel, advocates that "McCullers engages in a project of social criticism that, at its most penetrating, reveals the links between sexual intolerance and racial bigotry" (554).

In addition, there is a third way of considering McCullers's fiction which precludes the idea of a mutually exclusive interpretation with regard to certain characteristics of the novel. While critics such as Evans view McCullers's novel as a non-political study of the human condition on a deeper level, some critics do not fully share this approach, favoring instead a standpoint similar to that of Nancy Rich who states that there is enough evidence not to exclude "the probability that politics was a motivating factor in the genesis of the novel" (108). However, to a certain degree, the two critics Evans and Rich have found common ground in their interpretation of certain elements of the novel. For example, Rich shares Evans' idea that the novel should be read as a parable or a metaphor. Further, arguing that the novel can be described as a political parable and not a universal one, Rich contends that the novel's main character Singer functions as a democratic but ineffectual government, and that

Antonopoulos (Singer's obese and mentally ill friend) is the ruling king representing Christian idealism.

Moreover, Rich argues that Singer's visitors function as clusters of people whose main dilemma is that they ultimately fail to unite (112-14). For reasons of clarity, the long list of townies who visit with Singer, includes Mick Kelly who also seeks to unburden her heart and find a kindred spirit in the companionship of her mute neighbor. Still, since none of the characters seems capable of reaching out to the other, they all remain trapped within the confines of their own individual set of problems. Analyzing the characters closely, both Evans and Rich claim that their chance of achieving their individual goals would have been realized if they could only have worked together (Rich 114, Evans *The Ballad* 51).

However, Evans and Rich are not the only critics who have observed the characters' failure to find lasting happiness and establish social change within their community. In "A Feminist Reading: McCullers's *Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*" (1996), Gayatri Spivak also notes the characters' inability to unite in their strife for a common goal. Spivak states that the characters' "failure of collectivity" grows from separate class, gender and race struggles (131). To this end, Spivak suggests that "a fully politicized feminism, far from being a special interest, can bring a consideration of the power structure of the interstices of such a discussion within reach of practical analyses" (138). This argument clearly indicates that the main reading of McCullers's work is to be done from a predominantly political standpoint. Regarding how women's roles are dealt with in the novel and how issues of gender can be linked to those of race, literary critic Thaddeus Davis argues:

Without collapsing the difference of race and gender, McCullers attends in her literary production, with varying degrees of intensity, to race in the representation of women in the South. She assumes the

intricate connections of race and gender, particularly in conjoining the two categories and inscribing race in gender. (207)

This statement testifies to one of the most common critical views of her fiction and serves as an indicator that her work is first and foremost of a political nature. However, it is nevertheless crucial to note that apart from viewing the novel in a political or a psychological light, some critics have chosen to place her work in a religious context. Considering the novel in terms of a religious allegory, Jan Whitt argues in “The Loneliest Hunter” (1992), that McCullers casts Singer in the role of a Christ-like figure, a Savior (34). Similar to Evans, Whitt claims that Singer's visitors ascribe to him certain qualities according to their own needs which he does not necessarily possess. Whitt takes it one step further, advocating that Singer's visitors inadvertently depersonalize Singer and that he is in fact not the Christ figure they were hoping for (34-35). In this context, Whitt, like several other critics, explores the ramifications of estrangement and social isolation: “Singer is all too human. isolation damns Singer. His voice is never heard” (34-35). As the basis for her argument, Whitt points to the fact that Singer thinks of himself as “the loneliest hunter of them all” (29), which ultimately drives him to commit suicide.

Theoretical Approach

A central aspect of gender theory is the distinction between the basic concepts of sex and gender. The concept of sex refers to purely biological characteristics and features whereas gender refers to qualities dictated by society. In *The Second Sex* (1981), Simone de Beauvoir suggests that one is not born but rather becomes a woman. According to Beauvoir, sex is something natural whereas gender is socially and culturally constructed (301). However,

Simone de Beauvoir is far from the only one who has emphasized the distinction of gender and sex. In *Doing Gender* (1978), Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman advocate that a person's gender is not simply an aspect of what one is, but, more fundamentally, it is something that one does, and does recurrently, in interaction with others (140). Even though this behavior is originally gender based, it is socialized and internalized to the point that it may appear natural and innate. For this reason, gender does not define who one *is*, but rather what one *does* (West and Zimmerman, 69).

For the purpose of categorizing various elements adhering to gender behavior, John Stephens, author of *Gender, Genre and Children's Literature* (1996), outlines masculine and feminine qualities in the form of a binary system. According to Stephens, masculine and feminine qualities are in direct opposition to one another, creating what is referred to as "binary opposites" in which masculine qualities are considered to be of superior rank (18). Stephens proposes the schema below, claiming that "the socially desirable male conforms to the descriptors in the left-hand column; it is undesirable to transgress them. Similarly, the good woman conforms to the descriptors of the right-hand column; the undesirable woman transgresses them" (19).

Masculinity						Femininity
Strong						Beautiful
Violent						non-violent
Unemotional						Emotional
Aggressive						Submissive
Competitive						Sharing
Authoritative						Obedient

Rapacious						Caring
Protective						Vulnerable
Powerful						Powerless
Player						Prize
Independent						Dependent
Active						Passive
Analytical						Synthesizing

This male-female dichotomy bears a resemblance to deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida's binary system. According to Derrida, meaning is defined in terms of binary oppositions, "a violent hierarchy" where "one of the two terms governs the other" (Culler, 25). The meaning of each element is established, at least partly, through its relationship to the other element. However, the key idea in Derrida is that binaries do not hold, which means that Stephens's system is exactly what Derrida wishes to deconstruct.

In this context, it is also important to point out that there are gender theorists who consider an essentialist formula like Stephens's from another angle. For example, in *Gender Trouble* (1999), Judith Butler states that being a woman does not equal being feminine and, by the same token, being a man does not imply that you are masculine (32). Gender is merely an impersonation of ideals and norms that nobody fully lives up to (34). Society teaches us what behavior is acceptable and what qualities we should incorporate in our persona depending on our sex, that is, which gender roles we are expected to adapt to. From a very young age, children are subconsciously adapting to conventional gender roles as they let masculine and feminine qualities form their behavior and persona. In society, as well as in literature, the concepts of masculinity and femininity are based on certain fabricated norms and ideas which are deeply rooted within the confines of our minds. In order to

illustrate this, Butler introduces the idea of *gender performativity*. According to Butler, gender is a repetitive process within a rigid and regulatory frame. She states that “gender proves to be performance— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing” (25). This theory implies that gender is a produced and regulated phenomenon and not a natural occurrence by itself. Elaborating on the idea of gender performativity, Butler claims:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (25)

In this sense, gender is not a static phenomenon. Instead, the notion of performativity presupposes a culturally scripted shaping of identity which is generated by power through repeated citations of norms and their transgression. However, there are gender theorists who conclude that biological differences between men and women exist and that these differences are not necessarily learned as Butler and many others would suggest, but innate. In fact, in *Reproducing Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Psychology of Gender* (1999), Nancy Chodorow states that “there is one biological difference between men and women that may account for the occurrence of different traits and qualities between the sexes” (3). Chodorow

claims that since women bear children, they are by nature more caring and nurturing than men: “Women’s mothering is one of the few universal and enduring elements of the division of sexual labor” (3). The mother is the child’s primary caretaker. Mothering, caring and nurturing features define womanhood.

In the next section, I will examine how gender norms affect Mick Kelly’s personal development and my intention is to demonstrate that gender is a behavior which she learns and was not born with. As Judith Butler contends, “gender is not something one is, it is something one does, an act, or more precisely, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, a doing rather than a being” (25).

Learning Gender

Approaching *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* from the perspective of gender leaves room for many different interpretations. For example, several critics have studied the novel in terms of an autobiography. In “Carson McCullers and the Female Wunderkind” (1986), Constance Perry suggests that the character of Mick functions as McCullers herself telling her “own story of growing up in the thirties as a Southern female prodigy” (36). Adams also refers to the author’s own childhood and how growing up in the South served as a great source of inspiration on a very personal level; as a teenager her odd clothing and awkward body drew the contempt of her more feminine classmates, who threw rocks at her because she was “freakish-looking” and “queer” (567). The autobiographical component is clearly evident in the portrayal of Mick as she develops her own identity in various areas of life.

Coming to terms with her place as a young woman in society proves rather difficult for Mick since she is cast in an uncompromising role. Unlike many other girls in the novel who strive to live up to the feminine ideals and the image of the southern belle, she is

undoubtedly a tomboy. Even her first name “Mick” has an androgynous overtone. In the beginning of the novel, she is presented as “a gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve ... dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes – so that at first glance she was like a very young boy” (20). Usually, she prefers to wear clothes that otherwise would be found only in a boy’s wardrobe. The feminine clothes that were meant for girls at the time make her feel uncomfortable (41). In “Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers” (2001), Sarah Gleeson-White argues that as a tomboy, Mick repels the image of the southern belle, an image that other girls of that era generally would be encouraged to strive to embody (114). Unable to fit in among her peers and lacking siblings closer to her own age, she is leading a lonely life. She is too young to share the experiences of her older brother and sisters, and too old to interact and play with her younger brothers. The café owner Biff Brannon observes her solitary life:

He had never seen her come into the café with anyone her own age.
Several years ago, she had always tagged behind her older brother.
Later she would come in pulling a couple of snotty babies in a wagon.
But if she wasn’t nursing or trying to keep up with the bigger ones,
she was by herself (20).

However, the difference in age is not the main reason she feels separated from her sisters. Contently inhabiting the tomboy role, she is by nature different from her two older sisters Hazel and Etta with whom she shares a room. Unlike their younger sister, who does not embrace traditional gender norms, Hazel and Etta prefer to dress and act according to convention and custom. Gleeson-White argues that the two sisters function as foils to Mick, embodying the conventional idea of femininity in contrast to her tomboyishness (113). For

example, Mick's two older sisters do not refrain from lecturing her on her "silly boy's clothes" even arguing that "somebody ought to clamp down on you, Mick Kelly, and make you behave" (41). In a heated argument with her sisters, she defends herself by stating that "I wear shorts because I don't want to wear your old hand-me-downs. I don't want to be like either of you and I don't want to look like either of you. And I won't. That's why I wear shorts. I'd rather be a boy any day" (41). She associates boys with freedom, individuality, strength and adventure. These are all qualities and elements that she sees in herself. Confined by gender norms, she feels that she cannot express her true self as a female. She believes that had she been a boy, she would have enjoyed a greater freedom to act and dress the way she wants.

Subsequent to the argument with her sisters, she runs to her brother Bill who has a room all to himself. The walls of her brother's room are decorated with sketches and drawings that she made in art class. The majority of the motifs depict some sort of violent or dramatic scene: "She had imagined a big fire on Broad Street and painted how she thought it would be.... People were lying dead in the streets and others were running for their lives" (42). Another of her paintings displays what could be interpreted as a case of social critique regarding the working conditions of the poor people of the town toiling in the mills and factories: "Another picture was called 'Boiler Busts in Factory' and men were jumping out of windows and running while a knot of kids in overalls stood scrouged together" (43). Usually, she chooses motifs that are typically masculine, displaying scenes of violence, explosions and fires. Thus, it is hardly surprising that a great number of the qualities that Stephens attributes to the male ideal of his scheme (see page 13) can be found in Mick's character. For example, she is independent, active, fearless and strong. Generally, she does not wait for male or female friends to help or guide her.

However, her unconventionality comes with the price of her being lonely. Unable to find a way out of her loneliness, she spends a great portion of her spare time roaming the empty streets, even at night. Walking alone at night expresses an independence and boldness that is not commonly seen among other girls in town:

Some kids were afraid to walk through strange places in the dark, but she wasn't. Girls were scared a man would come out from somewhere and put his teapot in them like they was married. Most girls were nuts. If a person the size of Joe Louis or Mountain Man Dean would jump out at her and want to fight she would run. But if it was somebody within twenty pounds her weight she would give him a good sock and go right on. (93)

This passage testifies to the resilience and strength of Mick's character. Her strife for independence and the feelings of restlessness that she harbors are stronger than her sense of fear and danger. In the event of an attempted assault or rape, she believes that she would be able to defend herself by choosing to either fight back or run away, depending on the perpetrator's size. In accordance with the male qualities of Stephens's scheme and in opposition to what gender norms dictate, she feels that she is able to fend for herself and that she does not need a boy or a man to protect her. For the most part, she lets herself be guided by her own instincts and emotions rather than abide by gender norms. Her rebellion against convention manifests itself not only in a refusal to wear girls' clothes, but also in her smoking cigarettes (20), and in her taking a mechanical course in high school unlike the other girls who pick up sewing (94). These examples demonstrate how she naturally embodies both masculine and feminine qualities in the shaping of her own identity.

Creating such a strong-willed and determined female protagonist, McCullers draws on her own personal experience and her own lifestyle choices. According to González Groba, the author shows a unique insight when dealing with gender and racial issues in her narrative:

McCullers opposed the insistence of southern culture on racial “purity” and the oppression of blacks as adamantly as she did its demands for rigid sexual definition and the oppression of any deviant form of sexuality. She was persuaded that just as “blackness” and “whiteness” can coexist within individuals of both races, so too can femininity and masculinity be found equally within men and women.

(124)

González Groba contends that McCullers’s intention to allow for binary oppositions to coexist in her narrative can be found in McCullers’s own bisexual lifestyle and approval of social reform. In “The We of Me: Carson McCullers as a Lesbian Novelist” (1992), Jan Whitt argues that “although Carson McCullers camouflaged her love for women in her fiction; gay and lesbian themes are inarguably present in her work” (12). On several occasions over the years, McCullers’s own sexuality with reference to her work and her private relationships has been a subject of debate (Whitt 12). According to Whitt, the character of Mick Kelly “reflects the author's sexual ambivalence and inability to fit into the prescribed social structures of the South” (12). If every Carson McCullers critic agrees on this premise remains to be seen. However, regardless of the relationship between the author and her female protagonist, one thing is univocally clear: time has proven Mick to be a character who attracts a considerable amount of attention even to this day.

While remaining a girl, Mick does not refrain from acting like a boy, even on occasions of possible peril. For instance, a large new house is being built on the wealthier side of town and before the new inhabitants move in, the place serves as a playground for the local children. Shortly after a boy from town has climbed up on the roof of the new house, Mick decides to do the same. Sitting tall upon the roof, she experiences feelings of freedom and strength: “There was something about getting to the very top that gave you a wild feeling and made you want to raise your arms and fly” (34). She envisions her own future when she will have the means to live in such a large house. Once she is down from the roof, she begins to scribble on the walls of the new house: “at the top, she wrote EDISON, and under that she drew the names of DICK TRACY and MUSSOLINI and MOTSART. Then in each corner with the largest letters of all ... she wrote her initials – M.K” (37). By putting her own initials on the walls, she subconsciously tries to assert a sense of ownership of that to which she knows she has no rightful claim.

Spivak argues that men have the possibility of demonstrating qualities such as intelligence, strength, courage, and rationality, while women can only supply and offer sex (132). The names that Mick has written on the wall are all names of famous and/ or wealthy men – an inventor, a detective, a composer and a politician. There is not one single female name on the wall. Yet, she believes that she possesses many of the qualities and opportunities that the men represent: “Maybe she would be a great inventor. She would invent little tiny radios the size of a green pea that people could carry around and put in their ears. Also flying machines that people could fasten on their backs like knapsacks” (34). She equals great success and fame with masculine qualities that she finds in herself. In addition, once she has written down all the names, “she crossed over to the opposite wall and wrote a very bad word – PUSSY – and beneath that she put her initials, too” (37). By writing an expletive referring to the female sexual organ on the opposite wall, she asserts her presence as a girl among those

famous men. She emphasizes the one factor which, apart from money and social class, excludes her from fully aspiring to their level symbolized by the walls of the biggest house in town. Moreover, and in accordance with Spivak's argument, she emphasizes the one stock in trade that she can supply by writing "pussy" on the wall. Gleeson-White suggests that, by highlighting that "pussy" is "a very bad word", she "[makes] a connection between the unclean female body and sexuality" (114). In reference to Mick, Gleeson-White also states that "she has internalized cultural perceptions which construct femaleness as obscene, as pornographic" (115). Thus, the female body is presented as incompatible with male qualities such as intelligence, initiative and talent.

Despite the early resistance, Mick's strong-willed attitude does not prove to be permanent. Rich suggests that Mick functions as a nonconformist in the early stages of the novel, and that later she succumbs to peer pressure (115). The effects of peer pressure on her is most clearly demonstrated when she is hosting a party for her schoolmates. For the first time, she heeds her sisters' advice on clothes. In preparing for the party, she borrows a dress, a rhinestone tiara, pumps and a bra from her sisters. Eager to try out her clothes, she puts on her dress two hours ahead of time: "When she thought about putting on the fine clothes she just couldn't sit around and wait..... She even wore one of Etta's brassieres just for the heck of it" (97). Spending over two hours in the bathroom, she looks at her own reflection in the mirror wearing conventional feminine clothes. "Six different ways she tried out her hair..... Last of all she stuck the rhinestones in her hair and put on plenty of lipstick and paint. When she finished she lifted up her chin and half-closed her eyes like a movie star" (97). Despite the excitement of the borrowed clothes and the upcoming party, the experience leaves her in doubt about her self-image; "she didn't feel like herself at all. She was somebody different from Mick Kelly entirely" (97). Changing her appearance in accordance with gender norms and developing a new desire to wear girls' clothes and present herself in a new light, create a

conflict within her. She harbors feelings of estrangement from what she believes is her true identity.

Still, by dressing and acting in accordance with existing gender norms, she gains access to the world of her classmates and her sisters: “She felt so different from the old Mick Kelly that she knew this would be better than anything else in all her life – this party” (98). Leaving her tomboy identity behind, she actually celebrates her new lease on life. However, even though she seems to be willing to make certain sacrifices in order to fit in among her peers, Rich contends that she is forced into accepting a submissive role as a young woman due to gender norms working against her resistance (115). Nonetheless, given the enthusiasm shown for the new clothes and the possibility of fitting in, the aspect of Mick’s own will as an integral part of the changing and developing process should not be disqualified. Her desire to fit in among friends and classmates is stronger than the need for uncompromising independence. For the first time, the price of independence is too high to pay. Gleeson-White claims that by adhering to the rigidity of the gender norms of society, she “unwittingly undermines the notion of ideal womanhood” (14). For example, during the party, she slips back into her tomboy habits by jumping in a ditch but ends up hurting herself since she is wearing high heels: “With her tennis shoes she would have landed like a cat but her high pumps made her slip and her stomach hit this pipe. Her breath was stopped. She lay there quietly with her eyes closed.” (105). Being feminine puts an end to any physical and practical activity that she used to enjoy.

For the most part, Mick seems content to sacrifice some of her old habits in order to fit in: “For a long while she imagined what it would be ... And about the bunch she wanted to be with every day. She would feel different in the halls now, knowing that they were not something special but like any other kids” (105). It is without notable lament that she rejects or conceals her tomboy persona when she starts receiving attention from the boys: “A

bunch of girls were running down the street, holding up their dresses and with their hair flying out behind them.... A boy came up to her with a sticker and she started running too” (104). To this extent, changing her appearance made her part of the crowd. After the party she vows never to put on her boys’ clothes again (105). However, despite the joy of the party and the ticket to acceptance and belonging, she realizes that the people around her indirectly make her abide by the existing gender norms. After the fall in the ditch, she takes off her dress that is now stained, and removes her make-up. Wearing her old shorts one last time, she stands out on the front porch, looking out over her guests who are still playing on the lawn and in the street. Then she yells out to them: “Everybody go home! The door is shut. The party is over” (106). In this moment, she realizes that changes have and will continue to occur in her life.

There are several reasons that cause her to dismiss the party prematurely. Certainly, she feels a sting of humiliation after the fall in the ditch when her clothes become soiled with mud and dirt. She wants to preserve a sense of control after having been subjected to abide by the gender norms of others. Thus, she categorically ends the party all of a sudden. Admittedly, there is also the simple and likely fact that the party does not go the way she wants and that she feels disappointed with the outcome of the events and even with her guests themselves. In that respect, her gesture is an act of egoism. However, regardless of what factors cause her behavior, her gesture is a commanding one, more in line with the tomboy than her “new” feminine self. Standing on the front porch without really participating also marks an estrangement from her friends and classmates. After the party, she begins to wander the empty streets of the town alone in the middle of the night. Looking in through the windows of the houses along the streets, she feels isolated from the town around her. “She lighted the cigarette and put her arms around her knees. It was like she was so empty that there wasn’t even a feeling or a thought in her” (106). Learning to adapt to the gender norms of society and the expectations of her peers, leaves her feeling alienated and lost. Despite

forsaking her old behavior and appearance in order to fit in, her former confidence and sense of belonging are diminished.

A Non-Fixed Gender Identity

Sitting on the grass in some strangers' backyard listening to foreign music on their radio, Mick wishes to live in another country or another place far away from where she is at that point. It is clear that music is a comfort to her. Listening to Beethoven on a strangers' radio, she feels that the loneliness that she usually experiences is dissipated: "This was her, Mick Kelly, walking in the day-time and by herself at night. In the hot sun and in the dark with all the plans and feelings. This music was her – the real plain her" (107). Music allows for her to reconnect with her true identity again and through music, she feels connected to the world. For her, the notes of the classical symphonies that she hears testify to the oneness of the world: "The whole world was this music" (107). Indeed, she truly harbors a passion and a talent for music. Showing her independence, she prefers classical music to the more generic and popular choices of her peers (108).

Mick dreams of becoming a composer. Her strong interest in music helps her to survive in a world where she must struggle to keep her own identity and fit in. However, her passion for classical music also intensifies her feeling of isolation. This feeling is so strong that her existence appears to be separated into two spaces where mundane elements are reserved for "the outside room" while music is confined to "the inside room": "With her it was like there were two places – the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room.... Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room" (145). The inside room represents her true self (the tomboy and her dreams) – the part that remains intact despite the gender norms forced upon

her in the outside room. Spivak considers music to be not only a goal of its own for Mick, but rather a means to move from the inside room to the outside room. It is through music that she will be able to reach the outside world: “Yet music, she hopes, will also get her to the great outside world: to foreign countries of splendid opulence. It will give her class mobility and thus launch her into the ‘outside’ world.... It will permit her to place her unique name within the hierarchy of power” (132). Indeed, this is not the first time she wishes to put her name up there among famous and important men. As noted previously, she writes her own name on the walls of the new house along those of Mozart, Mussolini and Edison (37). Consequently, she perceives classical music as an expression of her identity (49).

However, despite the intense and powerful emotions stirred up in her by the classical tones, she realizes that her dreams can never be real simply because she is a girl. This realization pains her: “She put her fingers in her ears. The music left only this bad hurt in her, and a blankness” (108). In an attempt to aspire to her dreams, she tries to make a violin of an old ukulele. Unfortunately, the result is not a new violin, but a broken ukulele. Her older brother Bill lectures her by pointing out that “that’s one thing you don’t sit down and make – you got to buy them” (44). Shortly thereafter, she ends their discussion by slamming the instrument down on the floor like a sulking kid. Luckily, the failed attempt does not drain her source of imagination. Often, thoughts about the future keep her going. At this stage, however, her true self exists merely in the inside room, inside of her:

She lay on her stomach on the cold floor and thought. Later on – when she was twenty – she would be a great world-famous composer. She would have a whole symphony orchestra and conduct all of her music herself. She would stand up on the platform in front of the big crowds of people. To conduct the orchestra she would wear either a real man’s

evening suit or else a red dress spangled with rhinestones. The curtains of the stage would be velvet and M.K. would be printed on them in gold. (212)

Interestingly, her first choice of clothes is a man's evening suit. Despite what gender norms dictate, she still feels confident wearing male clothes but at the same time she contemplates wearing a dress and even jewelry. Male and female qualities are not in opposition when she is in "the inside room." Through her dreams of music, she has found a space where society's gender norms and her own true identity can peacefully coexist. Thus, she opposes the dichotomy of Stephens's scheme and by doing so, she reinforces Butler's theory that gender is performance. In the role of a conductor, she sees herself leading the orchestra. Having trouble following the advice and wishes of others, she feels that her natural place is that of a leader rather than a passive follower. According to Stephens's scheme, it is a male quality to be a leader whereas women are meant to assume a passive position. While gradually adapting to gender norms in the way she dresses, she does not comply with the feminine ideal. For the most part, she feels confident when she is in control as a leader in her relationship with others. Music allows her to be both a leader and a woman, and thus offering her a non-fixed gender identity.

Unfortunately, the classical pieces that she used to hear and the feelings that were stirred up in her become nothing more than a hollow memory offering her no solace whatsoever. In the end, there are several factors contributing to what can be labeled the defeat of Mick Kelly. Perry argues that Mick is subdued because of her sexual initiation – that is when she realizes that the artistic world is a man's world and that it is "impossible to be both a confident artist and a sexually adult female because in her culture female sexuality is shameful and dirty, meant to be mocked in graffiti" (44). According to Perry, she is defeated

because of her becoming a woman; “by realizing the shamefulness of female sexuality, she loses her artistic ambitions” (44). However, other literary critics are not willing to go that far. Spivak, for instance, suggests that “it is not her sex-predicament but her class-predicament that finally defeats her” (133). Arguably, however, McCullers dedicates more time and space in her novel to describing the emotional consequences of Mick losing her innocence and independence as a tomboy than she does to detailing how Mick is involuntarily forced into work.

Sexual Roles

Despite the fact that she only interacts with boys on a limited number of occasions, there is a great deal to say with regards to how gender norms affect Mick’s early sexual experiences. Once she does interact though, she changes her appearance to look more adult and attractive. Before going on a picnic with a friend and neighbor, Harry Minowitz, she borrows her sister’s blue necklace and silk dress. Even though she lives up to conventional gender norms as she changes her appearance to look more feminine, she still prefers to be in a position of control. For example, during the picnic, she is the one who proposes that she and Harry swim naked. Looking at Harry standing with his chest bare and “his skin light brown and the water making it shine” (239), she feels a sexual attraction awaken inside of her. This attraction is mutual. In fact, Harry compliments her on her looks: “I think you’re so pretty, Mick” (240). Gathering pine needles, moss and leaves, he constructs a simple bed for the two of them to rest on. After having finished bathing and eating, they experience intercourse for the first time. Up to this point, they are both virgins.

Nancy Rich suggests that Mick “uses [Harry] to satisfy her own need to experiment with sex” (116). It is unarguably true that throughout their relationship, she is the

one taking the initiatives and assuming the dominant role. As already noted, Mick incorporates several of those qualities that otherwise would be ascribed to a man according to Stephens' scheme such as assertiveness and decisiveness. After the intercourse, Harry experiences a shift in attitude and he is no longer content to follow Mick's lead. In his role as the male, Harry feels that he has to take responsibility for their relationship and be in charge. Overwhelmed by the first sexual experience of his life, Harry cannot but feel the full brunt of his emotions: "He cried. He sat very still and tears rolled down his white face. She could not think of a thing that made him cry" (241). According to Rich, she does not understand Harry and his reasons for reacting the way he does (116). He even goes as far as blaming himself for what happened saying that "it was all my fault. Adultery is a terrible sin any way you look at it. And you were two years younger than me and just a kid" (242). In an attempt to remedy the situation, he suggests they marry. However, she declines the offer by stating categorically: "I will never marry with any boy." Once again, she expresses a sentiment that goes against conventional gender norms.

Coming from a strict Jewish orthodox home, Harry feels deeply ashamed for what has occurred between them. Due to his religious upbringing, Harry considers sex without being married as an act of "adultery." Hence, the feelings of onus and shame weigh heavy on him. When Mick looks at him, she notices his reaction: "His eyes were bright and red and scowling. His face was whiter than any face she could remember" (242). During the long discussion that follows, Harry reveals his feelings of responsibility and his drastic plans for the future: "I'm leaving town. If I stayed mother could read this in my eyes." Rich suggests that by not understanding him, she "makes his position so uncomfortable that he leaves town" (116). She does not recognize the shame that Harry feels. Even though they both participated by mutual agreement, Harry is the one who raises the idea of guilt and shame. He

makes it clear that he is the one who should have acted differently and that “the fault” is exclusively his.

Unlike Mick who is more inclined to listen to what her heart tells her, Harry feels obliged to abide by the gender norms that society dictates and demands of him as a young man. Therefore, he feels that as a man, he needs to act whether he really wants or needs to. In this sense, he is a victim of gender norms as he believes that he must take action as a leader even though he has been content to be a follower up to that point. By trying to be the leader, Harry involuntarily makes her a victim of gender norms in turn as she is forced into a passive position that goes against her nature. Perry argues that this is an example of a man creating a sense of shame in a woman. According to Perry, Mick “is experiencing what it means to be female and inferior in her culture (43). Further, she contends that Harry plants the guilt in her, making her believe that she has committed a sin: “Harry’s guilty flight from his sexual intimacy with her, and indeed from the town itself, forces her to realize that to be female is to be somehow shameful and obscene. Perry’s argument is quite different from that of Rich who advocates that Harry is more of a victim of Mick’s need to experiment with sex. Perry even goes so far as to state that Mick’s identity as a young woman has been symbolically awaiting her from the beginning of the novel where she prophesies her fate as “PUSSY M.K.” (43). However, Perry fails to take into account the fact that it was Mick who initiated the sexual tension by suggesting they swim naked, and the fact that he feels ashamed vis-à-vis his mother and not in direct reference to Mick. He does not explicitly intend to blame her or hurt her in any way. On the contrary, he is actually quite concerned for her wellbeing and wants her to write to him once he has found a new place and let him know that she is ok (242).

After her first real sexual experience, Mick is left feeling “very old, and it was like something was heavy inside her. She was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be

or not” (243). She is trapped by gender norms that she cannot fully comprehend. Once she comes home, she feels invisible and far away from her family. To her great surprise, no one in her family can tell from the expression on her face what she and Harry have been up to: “she stood by herself in the dark back yard . . . It was almost worse this way. Maybe she would feel better if they could look at her and tell” (245). Unlike Harry, she does not share the shameful feelings that the experience evoked. Mick’s burden is clearly not that of shame. Instead, she feels that she would like to share rather than hide her experience, which contradicts the implication made by Perry that Harry projects his shame to Mick because of her gender (43). Harry never intended to, nor did he project any feelings of shame onto her. Instead, the worst feeling for her is not that of shame but the sensation of not being seen or heard. His need to take action forces her to function as a follower and not a leader. Ultimately, gender norms confine her to a passive position.

Concluding Discussion

This essay has dealt primarily with the impact of stereotypical gender norms. In order to confirm the validity of my thesis that these norms in Carson McCullers’s *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* compromise Mick Kelly’s identity formation, I examined how conventional gender roles affect Mick’s personal development and her early sexual experiences. Her life proved to be hindered by a number of obstacles, which is demonstrated by the way social conformity work to undermine some of her most characteristic personal traits.

Judith Butler states that being a woman does not equal being feminine and that gender is merely an impersonation of ideals and norms that nobody fully lives up to (34). These statements are especially true of the novel’s female protagonist. Indeed, Mick is a very lively and independent girl who spends a great deal of her time taking care of her young

siblings, going on small adventures or dreaming of a future for herself. She is a headstrong young woman who, due to being different from her peers, tends to be on her own a great deal. Still, in order to fit in, she changes her appearance and comportment to appear more feminine in accordance with conventional gender norms. Consequently, the tomboy side of her is cast aside. Thus, Mick is taught to be and act in a certain way, and she is rewarded and punished accordingly. In this context, Butler introduces the idea of gender performativity. According to Butler, gender is a repetitive process within a rigid and regulatory frame. She states that “gender proves to be performance— that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing” (25). This theory implies that gender is a produced and regulated phenomenon and not a natural occurrence by itself.

Nancy B. Rich suggests that Mick functions as a nonconformist in the early stages of the novel, and that later she succumbs to peer pressure (115). Indeed, as the story progresses, she is less independent than she used to be. Due to stereotypical gender norms, she learns that she is not supposed to rely upon her own talent or strength to succeed in life. Instead, her identity must be grounded in other factors such as appearance and beauty rather than courage or decisiveness. The “inner” qualities like intelligence and strength that make her independent and self-sufficient are discouraged while qualities that make her more co-dependent and reliant on the acceptance and approval of others are encouraged.

As showed in the analysis, stereotypical gender norms do not only affect Mick’s personal development, they also shape her early sexual experiences. Being a natural born leader, she finds it difficult to adapt to the new role that she must play in order to fit in: “she felt very old, and it was like something was heavy inside her. She was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be or not” (243). Her partner and friend Harry Minowitz is also suffering as a result of the rigidity of gender norms, as he believes that he must take action as a leader after he and Mick had intercourse for the first time. Up to that point, Harry had

been content when they both shared the responsibility for their relationship. By trying to be the leader, he involuntarily makes her a victim of gender norms as she is forced into a passive position that goes against her nature. In short, adherence to conventional gender norms makes her go from being a loner to being socially accepted as an equal among her peers; and from being a leader to being a follower, especially concerning sexual relations.

However, all aspects of Mick's life are not that bleak. By contrast, there are elements to which she clings and that allow her to develop a self-image that reaches beyond the limitations of her quotidian life. In the refuge of music, she finds solace. McCullers writes in reference to her female protagonist that "the music is her" (80). Thanks to her musical aspirations, finds a space where society's gender norms and her own true identity can peacefully coexist. Thus, avoiding the rigidity of stereotypical gender roles, she reinforces Butler's theory that gender is performance. In the role of a conductor, she sees herself leading a future orchestra. Music allows her to be both a leader and a woman, offering her a non-fixed gender identity. Unfortunately, as the novel progresses and her fate unfolds slowly but steadily, we learn that conventional gender norms play a large part in the shaping of her character to the extent that not even music can be of sufficient comfort. In the end, her ability to create her own identity within her gender free world of music is severely diminished. In conclusion, individual desire must suffer for the benefit of social conformity.

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