CHAPTER 3

CARSON MCCULLERS AND THE UNFINISHED MUSIC OF WOMEN

"Then in a dreaming way a chain of chords climbed slowly upward like a flight of castle stairs: but just at the end, when the eighth chord should have sounded and the scale made complete, there was a stop."

Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

There is no way around it—Carson McCullers led an interesting life. In a haze of alcoholism, love triangles, dramatic temper tantrums, and both male and female sexual relationships, McCullers' short fifty years can best be described as an erratic pursuit for that which might make her feel whole as a woman and as an artist, ultimately a search for unconditional love. It is hard to even consider McCullers' outlandish lifestyle as a Southern woman in the 1930s and 40s when communities were based upon family lines, rooted in expectations of gender, and tied to religious and social rituals. Yet McCullers dared to step outside social conventions, to reject the American tradition of religion, and to mock gender expectations. Prolific mainly in the 1940s, McCullers is known most for her novels and a single novella, yet her often neglected short stories encapsulate the same theme of isolation that her longer works have made famous. Each story

recounts a painful incident in the life of one who is different in some way, just as she was. Her highly autobiographical fiction heightens the reader's awareness of the relentless suffering of those who, like herself, do not fit in. Her characters attempt to find a balance between maintaining their own identity and pleasing those around them. Ihab Hassan writes in "Carson McCullers: The Alchemy of Love and Aesthetics of Pain" that he finds tension in McCullers' "juxtaposition of the power of love and the presence of pain" (313). Indeed, every McCullers' story has a character painfully struggling with love in some way. Perhaps Louis D. Rubin, Jr. says it best when he writes in an article titled after Hassan's, "Carson McCullers: The Aesthetic of Pain," that McCullers takes those who are unwilling or unable to conform and shows that they can be "transformed into the insight and awareness of art. The impetus to self-fulfillment involved in that realization can be enormously creative" (269). Ultimately, McCullers had a single decade of brilliant creativity where she personally has periods of transformation and, likewise, is able to ask her characters to transform. She is able to poignantly fictionalize dilemmas of femininity and, for all women, question codes of normalcy as well as expectations in human relationships.

Born Lula Carson Smith in Columbus, Georgia in 1917, McCullers was a piano prodigy from age five. The piano opened doors for the shy young girl and provided the basis for the most influential relationships of her lifetime. In fact,

beyond her use of the grotesque, music is the most common trope in her work. Lacking physical stamina due to persistent illness, McCullers eventually abandoned pursuit of her musical career and turned to writing, saying that "writing, in essence, is communication; and communication is the only access to love" ("The Flowering Dream" 279). Music, nevertheless, persists as her most common fictional metaphor. Not only are music and musicians central to the plot lines of many stories, but for readers McCullers' stories have a rhythm that moves melodically and then abruptly ends, leaving the piece and the story or character unfinished. Both male and female characters suffer in McCullers' fictional world, ironically because of the loneliness they find in love relationships. It is obvious that McCullers distrusts love and those who offer it.

In this chapter, I will highlight McCullers' female characters as a theme of emotionally shutting down reveals itself when women in various life stages analyze their gender and role expectations through the eyes of their love relationships. Women become grotesques because of their state of flux when they lose sight of themselves in their confusion and misunderstanding. They are emotional zombies who walk Frankenstein-style into the unknown. They feel an insistence to go though they lack a destination. As McCullers herself admits, "Flight, in itself, interests me" ("Vision Shared" 262); her female characters are in the habit of fleeing when their experience becomes intense or when asked to

reveal their identity separately from relation to an "other." McCullers is known, like other Southern women writers, for creating female freaks, but hers are a special brand of the emotionally-deficient.

3.1 Love, Music, and Loneliness

Critical to understanding McCullers' theme is separating her principles of love and understanding why she finds real love unattainable. McCullers writes in "Loneliness . . . An American Malady" that "Love is the bridge that leads from the *I* sense to the *We*, and there is a paradox about personal love. Love of another individual opens a new relation between the personality and the world" (260). In essence, McCullers finds that another self is created when one enters into a relationship, and *that* self is most often not the same as the genuine self that existed previously. One loses part of the self in order to love, a loss of identity that stunts all further personal growth. For McCullers, love is not sexual, romantic, or agape alone; love is panoptic. As such, it fuses and confuses the emotions, roles, and expectations of those involved and creates an area of indefinable funk. McCullers' understanding of love requires a roadmap and critics have offered assistance.

John Vickery writes in "Carson McCullers: A Map of Love," "[love] is the measure of the heart's desire, the goal of man's quest, and the image of the world he lives in . . . . The main characters have a threefold role: the lover, the quester,

and the dreamer" (13). With these impossible relationship expectations, McCullers sets her female characters in a position to try to be all things to all people. As a result, the women break down when they face their own extreme sense of isolation. Rubin writes that, for McCullers, loneliness is "a human constant, and cannot possibly be alleviated for very long at a time"; it is a solitude that is always painful and "art is the portraying of the anguish" (270). Pain from loneliness and alienation combined with a misunderstanding of love and how to find fulfillment in it produces the emotional freaks for which McCullers is most known. It also reveals a parallel with Bakhtin's view of carnival in that only in a state of community does one feel the freedom to show the authentic self. McCullers never allows her female characters a moment of communion. McCullers writes in "The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing" that "Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about—people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love" (274). It is easy to agree, as is often cited, that she writes of the "immense complexity of love" (*CS* 157). It also is easy to agree that she makes love too difficult.

A good exposition of McCullers' understanding of love is that expressed by the omniscient narrator in her novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café*:

> First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons—but the

> fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved. There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries . . . . The value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself. It is for this reason that most of us would rather love than be loved. Almost everyone wants to be the lover. And the curt truth is that, in a deep secret way, the state of being loved is intolerable to many. The beloved fears and hates the lover, and with the best of reasons. For the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved. The lover craves any possible relation with the beloved, even if this experience can cause him only pain. (*CS* 216)

McCullers' reasoning is reminiscent of Plato's *The Symposium* in that it is a philosophical perspective regulated by principles. In *The Symposium*, different orators present formal speeches, speaking in turn on the nature of love. While McCullers' narrator is the only speaker, she creates specific roles so that characters who play these roles later in the text speak quite clearly about love and give the same sense of speeches in turn. In McCullers' world, love cannot be reciprocal; it can only be given or received. To be in a love relationship, then, is to suffer, to intensify one's loneliness as love "seeks its own impediments" (Hassan 314). In this perspective, love is destructive because it wishes to consume the

beloved (Rubin 271). In his roadmap, Vickery writes of McCullers' characters' journeys, noting that McCullers asks characters to "pursue a dream in a world that is impatient with dreams and dreamers. In the most extreme form, the alternatives with which they are confronted are to compromise or to surrender" (13). It is almost cruel then, that in spite of this pre-destined understanding, McCullers' asks her female characters to try to attain her version of real love. And, when they cannot, she teaches that it is better to love than to be loved because the power is with the lover. In the end, McCullers grants no single character the total vision of love (Vickery 23). Her female characters embody both the "sadness and absurdity of love" (Slabey 47). In settings staged around music or musicians or through a planned musical story structure, they only *consider* reaching out to others. It is a predicament of confusion, distortion, and fantasy. McCullers' female characters exist to probe the area where love and pain meet.

But why music? If McCullers abandoned music and turned to writing, why then is her writing so musically focused? Musical allusions can be found in the majority of McCullers' works. In fact, McCullers' notes to *The Heart is Lonely Hunte*r, her first novel and the work she is still most known for today, indicate that she planned the novel according to a fugue: "This book is planned according to a definite and balanced design. The form is contrapuntal throughout. Like a voice in

a fugue each one of the main characters is an entirety in himself—but personality takes on a new richness when contrasted and woven in with the other characters in the book" (*Mortgaged Heart* 148). Musical knowledge is key to understanding the author's design as well as the pace of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* where the story repeatedly darts away from and then returns to the central character, John Singer, a deaf mute, as if he were the major chord from which the four melodies (Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, Biff Brannon, and Dr. Benedict Copeland) arpeggio up the scale and return. McCullers' emphasizes the same ideas presented in her treatise on love, again allowing no hope for the characters to find it.

Musical principles are found throughout her work. Michael C. Smith provides wonderful insight into McCullers' consistent musical structure in "'A Voice in a Fugue': Characters and Musical Structure in Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter,*" writing that "The fugue pattern is polyphonic. Though there is a single theme, there are multiple, separate voices which echo this theme. The common relationships among these are: imitation, canon, inversion, augmentation, and diminution" (259). Though Smith's focus is most specifically upon one particular novel, his research brings to light that music, whether in subject or form, is the foundation of McCullers' grotesque in that through her musical perception or vision, she creates chords/characters in which multiple notes/voices sound at once. Bakhtin provides insight into understanding

McCullers' polyphonic women in that, based upon his concepts, the women are rhetorical performers. Female characters try to heal their own spiritual isolation by using imitation and inversion to come to a new understanding of what it means to be female. They try to conform to the mold as established by others or, conversely, they become the opposite of what others expect.

Critics have researched McCullers' tie to music in attempt to find its thematic parallel. Barbara Nauer Folk contends in "The Sad Sweet Music of Carson McCullers," that McCullers uses music to reveal her vision of humanity, describing the vision as: "The race of men a grandiose chorus, a body in chains but nevertheless able to transcend itself in expression which is as variously toned, as painfully beautiful as its own mysterious nature" (202). The chains Folk refers to are invisible social constraints. For McCullers, musical or artistic success has larger gender implications. She believes the world of art to be male-dominated. Music is the vehicle through which she pursues gender equality, tries to rebalance the pendulum between the lover and the beloved, and tries to ease the loneliness she finds in the Southern female, as well as herself. Ultimately, McCullers turns to music to describe her characters' pain as seen in this passage from "The Aliens":

> Such grief is like a subordinate but urgent theme in an orchestral work—an endless motive asserting itself with all possible variations of rhythm and tonal coloring and melodic structure, now suggested

> nervously in flying-spiccato passage from the strings, again emerging in the pastoral melancholy of the English horn, or sounding at times in a strident but truncated version down deep among the brasses. And this theme, although for the most part subtly concealed, affects by its sheer insistence the music as a whole far more than the apparent major melodies. And also there are times in this orchestral work when this motive which has been restrained so long will at a signal volcanically usurp all other musical ideas, commanding the full orchestra to recapitulate with fury all that hitherto had been insinuated. (*CS* 78)

For McCullers, music (or sometimes simply sound) can be an agent of freedom, such as on the chain gang in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, where "the prisoners escape physical isolation through their chains and spiritual isolation through their singing. Music . . . elevates the soul, making the prisoners forget the fetters of chance and circumstance" (Slabey 53). But it can also be a carceral force. In "Court in the West Eighties," the narrator becomes so accustomed to distorted sound that when the natural "sounds from outside" become clear, they bother her as she tries to read. The tragic, life sounds of her neighbors keep her in her place.

Considering McCullers' dependence upon music, the reader's awareness of it as symbolic of her larger themes is vital. In "The Flowering Dream," she writes,

"Symbols suggest the story and theme and incident, and they are so interwoven that one cannot understand consciously where the suggestion begins" (277). Unfortunately, what most often occurs is that the character tries to express her artistic ability, to communicate her identity, or "to become part of another person, a group, or the world" (to find her "we" of me) and finds that her loneliness has only intensified (Vickery 14). In essence, the discovery of the self can be as painful as the identity-limiting discovery of one's significance to another or of understanding one's place in love. McCullers explains further in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* that the lover "must house his love within himself as best he can; he must create for himself a whole new inward world—a world intense and strange, complete in himself" (216). Why? Because for McCullers, and hence for the characters she creates, there is no trust in love, no place for vulnerability, no giving away of self. In this rigid environment where women are so fearful of losing self that they push away femininity, androgynous characters begin to appear. McCullers' female grotesques highlight the ideal of Southern womanhood, finding it something one has to unnaturally strive to "be." As a result, her fiction is full of women who are not accepted.

Amelia Evans, from *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, is the epitome of both McCullers' grotesque and her exploration of feminine independence. Amelia is a hard, mannish, quasi-female, who cannot force herself into traditional

womanhood. It is only through a dysfunctional relationship with the dwarfish Cousin Lymon that she is able to play the role of wife and homemaker for a time. As Louise Westling writes in "Tomboys and Revolting Femininity":

> The real force of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* lies in its depiction of a masculine Amazon whose transgression of conventional sexual boundaries brings catastrophic male retribution . . . . McCullers sought to deny the feminine entirely and allow a woman to function successfully as a man. She could not sustain her vision, because she knew it was impossible. (159)

A simple contagion develops: the tomboy is shunned, the artistic talent is stunted, the Southern woman becomes a freak (fitting somewhere between male and female), and both the male and female facades become parodies. McCullers uses the grotesque to explore the possibility of women defying their sexual roles. She often masks women with masculine attributes, creating tomboys, because she believes they can move more freely in the world. Westling says of McCullers' tomboyish women, "As a girl the tomboy is charming, but as an adult, she is grotesque" (*Sacred Groves* 113). Through socially or physically deformed characters, McCullers mocks the conventions of Southern womanhood. Her most poignant grotesques are not those women acting as men to gain acceptance, but those who are quite feminine but who do not understand what womanhood means

or what freedoms it entails. In "A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness: Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor," Sarah Gleeson-White writes, "she exaggerates acceptable femininity, like a drag queen, to make it seem perverse, dangerous and loose"; she sees it as "something women awkwardly put on and do" (52). The character's reaction to the standard mold of femininity as well as the life stages of feminine development become the underlying subjects of the stories.

Criticism about McCullers' inclusion of freaks in her work abounds, along with many references to the author's personal life. Because of her own painful, gendered experience, she noticed and empathized with pain, or the "freakish," when she saw it in others. An often recited account occurred in 1963 when at a social event she walked up to a twenty-six-year-old man named Gordon Langley Hall and, after some moments of careful study, said to him, "You're really a little girl" (Carr 519). Although taken aback, Hall felt liberated and acknowledged his efforts to hide his feminine tendencies. It was later determined that Hall had been wrongly sexed at birth and had always been a woman. In 1969, Gordon Hall was baptized Dawn Pepita Hall. She later married, becoming Dawn Hall-Simmons, and gave birth to a daughter. Hall credits McCullers for her "kindred spirit" toward isolated creatures and for "helping her to relate to someone in a meaningful human involvement" (Carr 520). Rachel Adams writes in "A Mixture of Delicious

and Freak: The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers," that Hall-Simmons' loneliness and marginality "become meaningful through the equation of her freakish condition with that of McCullers' characters" (552).

Other theories behind her characters' suffering range from "an existential anguish inherent in the human condition" (Adams 552) to cultural starvation to "the failure of initiation, the betrayal of love, and the horror of solitude" (Hassan 317). Adams presents a divergent view, arguing that many critics ignore the historical influences upon McCullers and overlook the fact that McCullers' "freakish characters may point to the untenability of normative concepts of gender and race at a moment when these categories were defined with particular accuracy" (Adams 552). McCullers, Adams concludes, presents women who are freaks simply because they cannot be assimilated into an acceptable mold; she also writes during an era in which gender is especially limiting. As a result, McCullers' female characters' attempts to force themselves into the mold of Southern femininity only serve to highlight their turmoil. Adams believes that the reader is left to consider the possibilities of a world free from the "tyranny of the normal" (553).

Critics who have studied McCullers' presentation of loneliness and spiritual isolation agree that she focuses on the loneliness of girlhood and the physical discomfort of female adolescence—both of which create freakish female

characters. “Certainly I have always felt alone,” McCullers acknowledges in the Preface to her second play, *The Square Root of Wonderful* (viii). She also writes of herself in a letter to her friend David Diamond that she “had accepted unquestioningly that her life would always be an *awful* loneliness” (Carr 168). One reason McCullers may have felt alone is that her radical ideas and behavior in a conservative time separated her from other women. Louise Westling describes McCullers as “a Southern woman whose imagination was frozen in collision with society’s expectations” (“Tomboys” 156). Her stories are fraught with anxiety as the female characters are in a crisis of identity; social pressures force women to accept an unrealistic feminine ideal.

Finding that one of the “best tactics for ignoring conventions is to omit their exemplars,” Jones notes that much feminine writing during this time is void of maternal characters, something Westling reasons is due to a “profound discomfort with the traditions of Southern womanhood” (Westling 155). Women feel a sense of deficiency or loss when their identity is based upon the accomplishments of becoming a wife and mother. According to Westling, some women writers pressed the boundaries further than familial lines, exploring the possibility of artistic development as a substitute for personal identity. She writes that, for McCullers, “[Artistic] Ambitions are the psychological equivalents for the physical assertiveness of the tomboy, and again the requirements of

submissiveness and restraint for the Southern lady have traditionally discouraged the pursuit of professional, artistic, or political goals" (157). McCullers, among other writers, produces a female freak that remains a chimeric combination of both sexes. Her stunted musical themes, then, become studies in the nature of Southern femininity. The predicament of the woman artist becomes the foundation for McCullers to explore femininity—in awareness of itself, in relationship to others, in pursuit of autonomy. McCullers gradually moves from analyzing the young girl's initiation into femininity to considering woman's position in male/female relationships to ultimately considering the possibility of human wholeness or of *understanding what might make one whole*. Ultimately, the grotesque McCullers presents is simply the woman who needs to be more than the "beloved"; she needs to be allowed to love.

Personally, McCullers never fully realizes the freedom she desires for her characters. Perhaps this is why her women characters only seem to intensify their loneliness through pursuit of their dreams. If music is her symbol of the ideal, neither she nor her characters attain the level of mastery desired. This is not to say that McCullers was inadequate as a writer, but that perhaps she did not live up to her own high standards. In "The Vision Shared," she writes, "The function of the artist is to execute his own indigenous vision, and having done that, to keep faith

with his vision" (263). I do not believe she did so. I believe McCullers knew intimately the pain of feeling imprisoned by one's gender and that she was able to capture this pain for readers. Admittedly, she wrote during a time of extreme homophobia in the country and personally faced the pain of society recoiling from her, but she does not allow her characters to reach the same level of freedom she affords Hall-Simmons. Is it because she thought it impossible? Ironically, McCullers most successful artist character may be the *male* deaf-mute from *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* whose name, Singer, and whose heart overcome obstacles of humanity and who becomes an influencer of others. McCullers admits that "sometimes communication comes too late for the part of the artist that is mortal" ("Vision Shared" 264). She never finds that communication possible for the women of her time.

3.2 The Female Grotesque

As previously stated, McCullers is known for creating freakish characters and exploring artistic possibilities in her four novels, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), and *Clock Without Hands* (1961), as well as in her only novella, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943). I find, however, that not only are the two intimately joined—freakishness and artistic pursuits—but that the grotesque is just as visible in her

lesser studied short stories. It is simply a grotesque of a different and gentler kind. Vickery's "Map of Love" explains the sense of isolation McCullers' characters feel, noting that "the feeling of being trapped within one's own identity and unable to form a meaningful relationship with others leads to the idea of uniqueness and ultimately of freakishness" (13). In a state of isolation, McCullers' women feel as though there is nothing normal about them and through paranoia and exaggeration begin to see themselves negatively simply because they are different. As Robert Phillips writes in "Freaking Out: The Short Stories of Carson McCullers," instead of visual freaks, in the short stories, "we find an inner freaking-out" (173). Still, the grotesque presented by McCullers is more than just the internalization of a typically physical repugnance. McCullers' use of the grotesque—specifically focused upon the feminine (and often rejecting the feminine)—must be revisited.

As Mary Russo writes in *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity* (1995), this particular type of grotesque causes one to "rethink the category of the grotesque in relation to deviance, temporality, and liberation in a different context" (ix). Whereas Kayser finds evil in deviance and change, Russo distinguishes her study by inverting "the usual vertical scheme" which posits the grotesque with the "grotto-esque," or lowness and darkness, and associates it with the sublime, and with discourses of liberation (iix). In reality, what Vickery, Phillips, and Russo are discovering is that the grotesque, as in the case of Carson

McCullers, is about exposure. Women characters are forced into situations where they are exposed to new circumstances, their identity is exposed (creating vulnerability), or they are simply *asked* to expose their identity (creating an identity crisis).

Though they do not have the same physically grotesque nature as found in the protagonists of the novels (and novella), the characters of McCullers' short stories are "immobilized as spiritual isolates of circumstance" whose predicament is explained and explored through a similar trope (Phillips 66). At least twelve of the nineteen stories published in the *Collected Stories* volume contain some aspect of abruptly ended music, of failed musicians, or are based upon a musical rhythm or structure. Often, the female character is trying to develop as a musician, and in every case the female character is trying to understand her place in the world. McCullers juxtaposes the idea of the female artist in the artistic world with simply the female in the patriarchal world. Both represent closed domains. Russo explains that "Although the models change, there is a way in which radical negation, silence, withdrawal, invisibility and the bold affirmations of feminine performance, imposture, and masquerade (purity and danger) have suggested politics for women" (54). The hindrances women face have subconsciously taught them the behaviors that receive response. Westling explains further that McCullers' women have to "adopt the perspective of their masculine colleagues

and function professionally as males" to have any measure of success ("Tomboys" 159). As will be demonstrated in examples from McCullers' short stories, the grotesque results from the female character's struggle to accept these circumstances, her facade of masculinity, or her mental anguish when she refuses to acquiesce. McCullers is writing her own story: "She was precociously acquainted with the deprivation of passionate love and with artistic failure . . . . McCullers felt personally damaged and artistically frustrated" (Perry 38). McCullers herself is the truest grotesque she creates.

Consequently, Russo's assessment of the Bakhtinian grotesque is relevant here to understanding McCullers' exploration of female identity in her work. Russo writes:

> The impressive amount of work across the discourse of carnival, or more properly, the carnivalesque—much of it in relation to the work of Bakhtin—has translocated the issues of bodily exposure and containment, disguise and gender masquerade, abjection and marginality, parody and excess, to the field of the social constituted as a symbolic system. Seen as a productive category, affirmative and celebratory, the discourse of carnival moves away from modes of critique . . . to models of transformation and counter production situated within the social system and symbolically at its margins . . .

> into the realm of what is called "the political" . . . a central concern of feminism . . . in other words, how the relation between the symbolic and cultural constructs of femininity and Womanness, and the experience of *women* might be brought together towards a dynamic model of a new social subjectivity. (54)

Admittedly, Bakhtin's ideas related to carnival were not necessarily directed toward the development of a new position for women; his work was genderless. Regardless of purpose, however, it is significant that he shows a grotesque body that is not static, but is connected to the rest of the world it lives in and that is developed through interaction with others. He adds humanity to the cold, classical body as well as depth to the nature of the grotesque, moving away from the idea of it as a aberrational body to be studied from the outside looking in. He reveals the journey involved in humanity because he presents the grotesque body as a continuous process or as Hélène Cixous calls it "the body without beginning and without end" (Russo 67). It is an extremely dynamic grotesque.

In "Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers," Sarah Gleeson-White insists that McCullers' particular use of the grotesque is far removed from the Southern gothic. Citing McCullers' own words, "I seem strange to you, but anyway I am alive" (264) from "The Vision Shared," an essay in which McCullers explains that any new breed of art must go

through awkward stages and, likewise, its creator must be misunderstood, Gleeson-White advocates what she believes to be "a crucial need to revisit the grotesque" (109). Similar to the ideas of Flannery O'Connor presented in "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," Gleeson-White writes that McCullers "accentuates the vitality of the grotesque vision" (108). In essence, Gleeson-White finds life in McCullers' pronouncement of strangeness and in her freakish female characters. To arrive at this conclusion, Gleeson-White relies heavily upon the Bakhtinian explanation of the grotesque, finding that through this interpretation "the grotesque, by its very nature, unnerves the world of classic identity and knowledge, for it tests the very limits of the body and thus of being. Crucially, Bakhtin celebrates this strange body for it is a site of production" (110). Indeed, Bakhtin writes in *Rabelais and His World*, "the grotesque . . . discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life" (48).

Beyond this, Gleeson-White also finds significance in the common need of both Bakhtin and McCullers to find a "different world" and "another way of life" due to their physical ailments. Preoccupation with the physical body and with gender configuration is a natural by-product of physical suffering. Gleeson-White situates both Bakhtin and McCullers' fascination with the body around the fact that each envied on varied levels the freedoms afforded a healthy and

unconditionally accepted physical body (McCullers faced perpetual illness while Bakhtin suffered from osteomyelitis, a bone disease which eventually led to the amputation of his leg). McCullers once told her good friend Newton Arvin that she "felt she was born a man" (Carr 159); perhaps this is because she believed that as a man she might not only have strength to conquer her physical illnesses but would find a surer place in the artistic world. The masculine characteristic she imposes upon her female characters become an investigation of a way of life she personally envied.

I would like to acknowledge and question Gleeson-White's suggestion that "McCullers' portraits of grotesque adolescence challenge the very notion of female limits," the idea that in McCullers' works "female adolescence might, rather, embody the possibility of endless metamorphosis" (112). I agree that McCullers creates grotesque female characters that cannot be joined with the Southern gothic and that are in a fluid state of development. I cannot, however, be as positive about characters whose only offered alternatives are to stop and become stagnant or to run the other way. In what sense is there celebration? Gleeson-White leans upon the liminality of McCullers' tomboys, writing that they "embody a kind of dynamism and active potential" (113), but I find that McCullers writes the tomboy in despondency over the loss of hope of feminine acceptance. McCullers herself suggests that each of her characters is, in some

sense, a freak who cannot conform to normative standards of comportment and physical appearance (Adams 557). In no way does McCullers celebrate femininity. Moreover, she hides from it, camouflages it, or degrades it personally; she often masks her own femininity to try to become more male and obtain what males naturally possess. Consistently throughout her work, McCullers explores female identity; she tries to achieve an understanding of the overlapping, simultaneous roles of women as daughters, wives, mothers, sisters, friends, and artists through her deployment of the grotesque. She wants to understand what happens to a woman's identity when she plays a role, becomes a rhetorical performer, in a relationship with another, or multiple roles with multiple others. In the end, there are no examples in McCullers' entire canon of a female character that is able to maintain her identity in a relationship or without giving up, she would say, "too much" of herself. Though McCullers uses the grotesque in a productive manner to explore feminine boundaries, any assertion of liberation or celebration I find to be exaggerated.

3.3 The Influence of Fyodor Dostoevsky

McCullers finds a strong correlation between Southern writers and Russian writers, such as Fyodor Dostoevsky, Leo Tolstoy, Anton Chekhov, and Nikolai Gogol. Noting the cruelty and the callous manner in which tragedy is presented by

the Russians (side by side with the humorous), McCullers writes in her essay "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature" that "the Southerners are indebted to the Russians" because farce and tragedy are "superimposed one upon the other so that their effects are experienced simultaneously" (252, 253). She describes the technique as "a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, and the whole soul of man with a materialistic detail" (Carr 33). In essence, McCullers admires Dostoevsky's use of the grotesque. Subsequently, McCullers specifically credits Dostoevsky for reporting the evil of life with "the sharpest candor, fusing the most diverse emotions into a composite whole," but also for employing "an analytical approach" (255). While she finds a common attitude among all the realists—each tries to analyze man's adjusting to his own unhappiness (the assumption being that man is unhappy)—Dostoevsky impresses McCullers because of his raw honesty in depiction of appalling situations. McCullers ultimately finds that Dostoevsky offers "personal solutions" to problems that are "metaphysical and universal" (256). She writes:

> The books of Dostoevsky—*The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Idiot*—opened the door to an immense and marvelous world . . . It was a shock that I shall never forget—and the same amazement takes hold of me whenever I read these books

> today, a sense of wonder that cannot be jaded by familiarity . . . Old Russia and our Georgia rooms, the marvelous solitary region of simple stories and the inward mind. (Carr 32).

Many of Dostoevsky's techniques inform the younger author's writing style.

Though not often given such credit, Dostoevsky must be the foundation for McCullers' use of the grotesque and her creation of freaks. As a child exposed to the traveling freak shows of the deep South, she learned early that "one's physical aberration was but an exaggerated symbol of what she considered everyman's 'caught' condition of spiritual isolation and sense of aloneness in spite of his intense desire and effort to relate to others" (Carr 1). It is her study of Dostoevsky that provides insight into the juxtaposition of incongruent behaviors. McCullers' novels reflect this influence. Berenice from *The Member of the Wedding* chooses her second husband based upon the fact that his ugly, disfigured thumb reminds her of her late husband's; her third husband is chosen in similar fashion. *Reflections in a Golden Eye* is a mixture of tragedy and absurdity in every aspect: "Within its 183 pages a child is born (some of whose fingers are grown together), an Army captain suffers from bisexual impotence, a half-witted private rides nude in the woods, a stallion is tortured, a murder is done, and a heartbroken wife cuts off her nipples with garden shears" (*Time* Feb. 17, 1941). McCullers' remaining novels, novella, and short stories follow suit. For example, a black woman in "The

Aliens" is described as "deformed—stunted, warped, and undeveloped . . . at one corner of her mouth there was an ugly open sore and beneath her lower lip she carried a wad of snuff" (*CS* 76). Each of these physical aberrations serves to highlight some internal anguish or spiritual bankruptcy. Like her mentor, use of the grotesque is, by far, McCullers' most studied technique.

Second, it is not just that the two authors' characters are grotesque, but that they use the grotesque to highlight the lonely and the isolated—characters who feel repressed, wronged, unaccepted, unfit, or unworthy. The authors focus upon characters that are often battling themselves, proving that the grotesque can be as much a psychological predicament as a physical condition. In "Dostoevsky and America's Southern Women Writers" (1981), Temira Pachmuss writes, "Like Dostoevsky, she uses the technique not for amusement, but to create an atmosphere of loneliness and isolation that is associated with mental (and often physical) deformity" (116). She writes mostly of women who lack a "we of me" (a phrase made famous by McCullers' Frankie Adams who wants to join her older brother and his new bride as part of their marriage) or who lack an understanding of their position in the "we" of which they are already a member and become too distorted to function. In almost every case, McCullers' grotesque serves to parody what the character sees as an unjust social condition and to show the fragmentation of women's lives. Perhaps this purposeful grotesque was born in

study of Dostoevsky's technique whose characters are noted for symbolizing the ideas they represent. In "The Grotesque in Dostoevsky," George Gibian writes, "Dostoevsky presents characters who cast themselves in roles of grotesque buffoons in order to protest against circumstances which they feel incapable of combating any other way, as a form of escape or dissent" (265). Analogous to McCullers' grotesque women characters, who lack understanding of their circumstances and thus give the reader their own distorted hind-sighted vision only after they have faced a major dilemma, Dostoevsky's presentation is surreptitious because the reader retroactively recognizes the grotesque introduction of the idea (265).

Third, just as Dostoevsky often writes of extreme situations which serve to highlight larger social conditions, McCullers presents universal problems of women through poignant relationships and intense, climactic events within them. McCullers' "Instant of the Hour After" is the story of a husband and wife who both drink very heavily and who are slowly destroying their relationship through mutual abuse. Their relationship is more incarcerating than endearing. Marshall says to his wife, "Oh yes. You love me best when I suffer" (*CS* 45). The two are prone to fighting, hallucinating, and losing touch with reality. The young wife envisions herself literally encapsulated with her husband in a bottle "skeetering angrily up and down the cold blank glass like minute monkeys looking like fleshy

specimens in a laboratory. With nothing said between them" (*CS* 46). The story is only mentioned in passing in criticism, and that only in a few articles; in fact, it is a story that McCullers' writing teacher suggested she revise. It is an important story, however, as it presents an idea contained in all of McCullers' fiction: living in a glass house, feeling watched and judged from all angles by one's family or peers. Though the story contains obviously grotesque elements (and this is where most criticism stops), it also shows the vortex created when one feels that others are dissecting, judging, and labeling. Paranoia is found in almost every character. Dostoevsky's themes may be larger, often with cosmic messages, but both authors push toward an extreme moment after which the narrative grants an abrupt release; both authors write of "people of deep feeling who have been somehow crushed" (265). Gibian writes, "Grotesque behavior of some characters is an indication of their deeply disturbed state of mind or their inner bankruptcy" (265). McCullers' man and wife feel like "specimens in a laboratory" not only because of their lack of relationship with each other, but because each is numb to feeling anything at all.

Fourth, like the exposing glass bottle of "Instant of the Hour After," McCullers believes that both the Russian Realists and Southerners are writing about a place they can never escape. She finds that Dostoevsky dramatizes "the agony of the human soul and was a master of the grotesque . . . his heroes, encountering the ever-increasing dangers of the present-day world, with its

rejection of religion and its bizarre relationships, are unable to transcend the frenzied state of human existence" (Pachmuss 115). Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* (1872) personifies this circumstance graphically as Satan plays an active role in human experience (115). His warring of good versus evil represents the political battle between idealists and conservatives at the time, but there are similarities in the entrapments of the relationships McCullers presents. "A Domestic Dilemma" is a marriage tale with many parallels to "Instant of the Hour After," with one exception: there is the sense that, no matter what, the marriage is fateful. Martin (a name very similar to Marshall of the other story) and Emily see their marriage being "frittered by a drunkard's waste," yet they accept it as part of the "immense complexity of love" (*CS* 157). Though the title suggests there is a dilemma or an instant where a decision will need to be made, there is only resigned acceptance of unacceptable circumstances. Likewise, Dostoevsky's tone in novels such as *The Possessed* suggests that the ideal is unobtainable; therefore, man should accept his imperfect state.

Interestingly, while McCullers refers to Dostoevsky as a mystic, seemingly in admiration, I find that she does not follow his sense of possibility or mystery beyond the temporal world. She does not see a way out. In that sense, he depicts a world more hopeful than hers. Dostoevsky mimics the terror of God versus Satan, and never presents an unrealistic utopia, but he does show a glimmer of hope that

if one endures the intense circumstance, he can come through it and find affirmation. Pachmuss writes that Dostoevsky "shows that the road to faith is most difficult because it leads through violence and excruciating pain. A spiritual pilgrimage to affirmation cannot be completed without an agonizing experience of suffering in the alienated world of today" (115). No matter the violent circumstance, he does allow for that affirmation. On the contrary, as Louis D. Rubin, Jr. writes, "Carson McCullers' people are there to stay, and their yearning for something better and finer and more fulfilling has a kind of painful angst about it. Their yearning for the metropolis, as has often been said, is like that of Chekhov's provincial Russians for Moscow: for a place of impossible fulfillment" ("The Aesthetic" 267). Though McCullers refers to God and includes religious phrases both in her fiction and in personal memoirs, there is a bleak sense of agnosticism that overrides all such language. Pachmuss writes, "For McCullers, mental anguish is the only possible bond among people; in Dostoevsky's eyes suffering, no matter how painful, leads to self-knowledge, humility, responsibility for the failings of other people, and to Christian 'active' love as a lofty harbinger of universal brotherhood, a new family of mankind" (12). Whether or not one agrees that suffering inevitably produces this moment of self-knowledge is irrelevant, however. McCullers never seems to allow her characters to move past the point of suffering.

A passage from Virginia Carr's esteemed biography, *The Lonely Hunter*, explains McCullers' sense of isolation as well as her lack of hope in relationships:

> She reasoned that part of her trouble was that she could not pray. She admitted that she had always felt a need to be close to God, yet for too many months—years, in fact—she had ignored Him . . . . If only God would help, she exclaimed, but instead, she felt a sense of abandonment, a loss of God and godliness which haunted her, intermittently, much of her life . . . she sometimes saw Him as a capricious deity whose specialty was freaks. (194)

McCullers did attend church for a number of years growing up. She enjoyed the sense of belonging to a group. But the feeling of belonging did not last. Her memoirs reveal that she never felt the church to offer a genuine "we," and she eventually stopped attending. Later in life she was to reveal just how disappointing this time was to her, slandering a large, prominent church in one of her novels by sarcastically judging it by its appearance, "a church like that was bound to be real . . . the pillars of the church were men of substance . . . " (*Clock Without Hands* 10).

Both authors reveal their lack of understanding of the capacity and function of love. Clearly, Dostoevsky helps shape McCullers' overall vision of love. *The Brothers Karamazov* is the story of a man who has huge ideals about politics and the world, but who cannot bring his grand intentions home to his family. Likewise,

The Ballad of the Sad Café is about a woman who lacks the understanding of love and its purpose in relationships. Her most famous grotesque, as so many others she creates, provides outward signs of a mental struggle, of "man's incapacity to expand, to give of himself completely or to receive love—an impasse fraught with deep anguish" (Carr 2). Ivan Karamazov and Amelia Evans both show love in an attitude of coldness and detachment. Pachmuss contends that Amelia loves Cousin Lymon only for her own sake, and is unable to transcend her own selfishness in love (116). Again, McCullers finds it easier to love than to be loved, for in the latter, one loses all sense of self. In fact, one may argue that McCullers' characters, in general, are unable to genuinely reciprocate in any love relationship for any extended period of time. Dostoevsky and McCullers both posit their idea of love in a realm that is admirable, but unfeasible and ultimately useless. Dostoevsky loftily argues that genuine love is transcendent; McCullers writes that "passionate, individual love—the old Tristan-Isolde love, the Eros love—is inferior to the love of God, to fellowship, to the love of Agape"—this can be read as a hollow statement considering her pronouncements of her faith in God (*Mortgaged Heart* 281).

Ultimately, both writers simply make it too difficult to love or be loved. Because of their self-imposed, insurmountable standards, their version of love is unattainable on earth. The hero in Dostoevsky's "The White Nights" and the

Underground Man in his short existentialist novel *Notes from the Underground* characterize the emotional emptiness of those who disengage from their circumstances because they cannot find love. With characters like the divorced John Ferris from McCullers' "The Sojourner" who is detached from his current relationships and is immediately pitched into life-reflecting reverie upon unexpectedly seeing his ex-wife and Dimitri Karamazov who prefers to live in a world of drunkenness and debauchery, both authors present characters that prefer daydream to reality. They become trapped within themselves. John longs for the relationship he assumes between his ex-wife, Elizabeth, and her new family so intensely that he returns to his own unsatisfying relationship with a woman and her son and portends the part of doting father and husband. It is as if seeing Elizabeth and hearing her play the piano (music becomes the bridge of the story) brings back memories of a world he can no longer enter: "The melody, the unfinished music that Elizabeth had played, came to him suddenly. Unsought, the load of memory jettisoned—this time bringing only recognition and sudden joy" (*CS* 146). In a reverie of a different life, he has the sudden thought that he might recreate happiness with someone else. As could be foretold, however, the "sudden joy" is temporary though he desperately tries to hold on to it. He tries to force his desire for an ideal family upon his mistress' child: "With inner desperation he pressed the child close—as though an emotion as protean as his love could

dominate the pulse of time" (*CS* 147). The sense of loneliness is overwhelming, however, and the artificial nature of John's life is stronger than the façade he creates. For both authors, many other lonely characters exist estranged from the world around them, choosing to remain in one town or even one home with no contact with others; "there is no intervening force from outside, no hope of escape from the stifling atmosphere and terrible loneliness. The characters are left to play out their tragedy and doom by themselves, unaided" (Pachmuss 118).

It has been documented that McCullers was absorbed in a Dostoevsky novel when her family home caught fire in 1935. She remained unaware of the blaze until the crackling of the fire, which she had decided was her brother at play, had increased to a loud roar and part of the ceiling had collapsed. Significant damage resulted in a real life scene that could have been seamlessly interchanged with a fictional scene in her work—a character immersed in a book while her home burns around her. The story is realistic, terrifying, and funny all at the same time. It is, as Dostoevsky refers to another Russian Realist's work, "demonic vaudeville" (Gibian 270). Perhaps the label encompasses his work and McCullers' as well. So much of the younger author's technique can be traced to the Russian. In fact, the only real distinguishing trademark that reveals McCullers' individualism, I believe, is her use of the musical trope *in combination with* the

grotesque, the sense of isolation, the suffocating sense of no escape, the incapacity to love—the themes of her mentor. Her most known and most critiqued short story, in fact her first published work, "Wunderkind" (1936) culminates all of these themes.

3.4 "Wunderkind"

As noted above, McCullers often links artistic freedom with masculinity or presents circumstances where talent is denied because of gender; her best known short story, "Wunderkind," is no exception. As Leslie Hankins writes, "the female artist in the nineteenth and early twentieth century usually had to undergo an additional preliminary interrogation of gender-identity even to choose to have a vocation outside of the domestic sphere" (394). This is an especially devastating examination for McCullers. Constance Perry writes, "McCullers shows how social forces damaged ambitious people, particularly when they were female" (36). Centering upon fifteen-year-old promising pianist, Frances, "Wunderkind" is typically autobiographical. As previously stated, McCullers had aggressively pursued her own musical career, even announcing as a young child that she wanted to be a concert pianist. However, at age 15, she suffered several weeks of debilitating illness—one of the first of many similar bouts—and wondered if she had the physical stamina to continue to pursue music. At almost the same time, her beloved music teacher, Mary Tucker, announced that she was moving away from

Georgia because of her husband's job transfer to a northern state. Though McCullers had already begun to fear that her musical ability was waning and had begun to turn to writing instead, she lashed out at her teacher as if she had purposefully abandoned her; she severed their relationship in 1934. Later that same year, McCullers' parents, unaware of her desire to write, sold a family heirloom diamond to obtain the money for her to attend the Julliard School of Music in New York City. McCullers' obligation to make good use of the money refocused her on music for a time. Almost fatefully, however, she lost the tuition money during her move to New York. The loss provided the opportunity to stay in the city where she was able to immerse herself in a world of writers. She finally felt free to openly pursue writing.

Analogously in "Wunderkind," though the teacher is male, Frances becomes a star who has been "struck too high, for whom the fall now is inconsolably painful" (Carr 62). The dilemma of the story—in fact, the climax—comes when the male teacher, Mr. Bilderbach, tries to force Frances toward a musical perfection she knows she can never attain. Alice Hall Petry contends in "Carson McCullers's Precocious 'Wunderkind'" that Frances is overwhelmed by the desire to please the male figures with whom she has established relationships—Mr. Bilderbach, Mr. Lafkowitz, and her male peer and violin virtuoso, Heime (32). Frances wears the mask of piano prodigy and a maturity

beyond her years that is forced upon her by her teacher's expectations. She becomes a grotesque simply because she loses who she is in an attempt to become who everyone thinks she should be, and because she remains in a state of non-identity. Echoing Russo's ideas of the female grotesque, Frances feels forced into a masquerade of what others want her to be. She tries to perform based upon others' expectations and has an emotional breakdown when she realizes other paths available to her.

Sadly, Frances trusts music to show her the way. As Petry asserts, "She is drawing heavily upon the capacity of music to evoke intense emotional response" (33). Music fails Frances. When suddenly she cannot summon music to support her, she is stripped bare and has no other means of articulation. Frances whispers, "I can't. I don't know why, but I just can't—can't any more" (*CS* 69). Frances notices the stiffness of Mr. Bilderbach's body, and knows he has closed himself to her when she refuses to try to play the piece again. She feels utterly alone; as McCullers herself explains in "The Flowering Dream," "Communication is the only access to love—to love, to conscience, to nature, to God, and to the dream" (282). Frances has no understanding of how to allow that communication to happen; she has never before stepped outside of her role.

It is true that youth and gender together make Frances especially vulnerable; McCullers shows apt perception of Frances' intimidation by her much

older teacher and by her male peer. Her dilemma is heightened not only by the fact that she is at an age when she cannot understand the complexity of her emotions or feelings toward her teacher (neither can she express them), but also by the fact that she truly loves Mr. Bilderbach who has accepted her like a daughter. She wants to please him. Nevertheless, McCullers takes Frances' vulnerability to extreme, presenting the episode with a sense of suffocation, as something that incarcerates Frances, citing that "the keys of the piano hemmed her in" (*CS* 67). When Mr. Bilderbach and Mr. Lafkowitz perform together, Frances becomes paralyzed by a masculine force and recognizes a world she cannot enter. In "Carson McCullers and the Female 'Wunderkind,'" Constance Perry writes, "Adolescence brings a paralyzing knowledge of inadequacy to the exceptional girl and bars her passage into the world of art" (37). Additionally, Frances feels her fate sealed when Heime, whose talent with the violin equals her own on the piano, is invited to perform at Carnegie Hall. Heime is photographed, alongside his teacher (and hers) in a newspaper article that praises his talent in a recent concert in which she had played with him. According to Perry, "Frances' ability and desire to be a musician collapse when she realizes that her gender probably thwarts her chance for a success like Heime's in the world of art" (39). In this social circumstance, Frances believes she is doomed to a stunted life as a "Wunderkind," never that of a true artist.

Not only is "Wunderkind" a story with a musical theme, but its progression parallels that of a staged performance. When Mr. Bilderbach offers cake and milk to Frances before her piano lesson and she defers, saying "I'll wait till afterward" (*CS* 59), the reader senses that he should be aware of an intermission to come "later in the show" and of a conductor tapping his baton to get the audience's attention before the concert begins. The audience then knows to wait for dramatic elements such as the cacophony of sound when abruptly, "A harsh chord sounded from the piano" (*CS* 60). It is as if, while members of the audience sit up straight in their seats, the sonatina begins, "discordant yet somehow simple" (*CS* 60). What follows is a fugue—a contrapuntal, silent conversation in which Frances and Mr. Bilderbach argue their sides through their actions.

Though the action of the story surrounds Mr. Bilderbach's desire for perfection from his student in one particular performance, other memories create counter-subjects. Frances' mind darts to previous incidents which serve as intermezzos or brief, independent compositions which serve to connect the major divisions of the piece. These intermezzos provide depth and background; they show the emotional connection between Frances and Mr. Bilderbach. Before the climactic moment when her mind disallows her fingers to play again, Frances stops in caesura or rest, a pause that heightens the conflict that is to come. Mr. Bilderbach, watching intently, says, "Now we begin" (*CS* 67). Demanding a

controlled andante pace and asking that Frances "feel the tragedy and restraint," Mr. Bilderbach pushes Frances saying "I know what you have" (*CS* 69). But as she plays the notes, the conviction (and hence, the potential for the future) is not there and they both realize it. Mr. Bilderbach demands passion; he tries to "build – her –back" as his name suggests. The audience witnesses the unexpected recapitulation as he demands she start again and plays "all of it. Now!" (*CS* 69). For Frances though, there is nothing left to play. She hurries out of the music studio, noticing as she leaves that Mr. Bilderbach's hands looked suddenly purposeless.

Some critics close in upon the sexual nature of "Wunderkind," emphasizing that Frances is suddenly faced with a relationship involving mature sexual awareness and that she runs. Petry writes, "The intimacy of a one-on-one situation is something she cannot handle" (36). And, to be fair, the sexual naiveté is there. In fact, McCullers actually has Frances' regress in age when she runs from the music studio; she has her return to "the games of children" (*CS* 70). Nonetheless, there is much more to this story than an adolescent coming into awareness theme. Frances feels trapped, abandoned, and alone. Many of McCullers' stories deal with situations where the dramatic tension is brought to a head only to have the protagonist, most often female, try to find a way of escape when she cannot handle the tension. The real question is, where is she running to? I find that critics often

overlook the most obvious frustration for McCullers' protagonists. When they run, they worsen their condition. In addition, the subsequent state of being "nowhere," creates their confused state of mind and gender that makes the characters grotesques.

The frustration McCullers' women face is from living in a sort of "glass house" and not understanding who they are and where they may be accepted for themselves. McCullers seems to use her short stories to study this frustration in all stages of a woman's life and in all types of relationships. I would like to conclude with some short stories, neglected elsewhere, in which the female character tries to develop her identity, her position in relationships, or, most basically, to simply understand who she is. In each scenario, the female character is a grotesque as delineated by Russo, Yaeger, Presley, and others. The female character may behave normally on the surface, but as Robert Phillips has pointed out, suffers an "inner freaking out" and becomes immobilized as a "spiritual isolate of circumstance" (66). She is exposed and panics. Sadly, the condition is a result of her need to understand the "immense complexity of love" (*CS* 157).

3.5 Lesser Known Stories

Similar to the theme of "Wunderkind," McCullers continues to explore the role of females in relationships in her entire body of short stories, especially the ritual experiences of femininity from adolescence to adulthood. In example after

example, she depicts women who lose all sense of identity when they face situations where they must act outside their expected roles. In "Correspondence," for example, first published in *The New Yorker* on February 7, 1942, McCullers' expresses her sympathy for the pains of growing up and of one's first romantic infatuation. In the story, Henrietta Evans is a young freshman trying her hand at writing love letters to an anonymous South American pen pal. She declares that she has always been crazy about South Americans though she has never met any (*CS* 120). The pen pal, Manoel Garcia, never answers, and the identity-shaping crisis inflicted upon Henrietta is painful to watch. McCullers authenticates Henrietta's age through the inappropriateness of her comments to Manoel; Henrietta writes details of herself that would be obvious turn-offs to a developing romance: "My figure is not very good on account of I have grown too rapidly" (*CS* 119). She also announces that she has broken out in hives, that the photo she sends is of her dog scratching himself, and that she no longer believes in God. Still, "Correspondence" is not simply a characterization of adolescence. Over the course of the four letters Henrietta writes, she changes the closing of her letter from "Your affectionate friend, Henky Evans" to "Affectionately yours, Henky Evans" to "I beg to remain, Sincerely yours, Henrietta Evans" to finally "Yrs. truly, Miss Henrietta Hill Evans" (*CS* 121, 124). In essence, with the increasing formality of Henrietta's responses, the story becomes a dramatic monologue showing the

slowly hardening emotion of a burgeoning woman trying to have the romance and feminine charm she believes other girls her age have. She becomes a performer playing a part that "saves face," but the reader is aware of her internal suffering.

Surprisingly, "Correspondence" is one of the few stories analyzed by critics, There are two articles to date. Dale Edmonds' "'Correspondence': A Forgotten Carson McCullers Short Story," focuses upon the story as a demonstration of McCullers' narrative range. Edmonds believes that "Correspondence" particularly substantiates McCullers' talent and shows that she can vary in authorial tone. He labels the story a "light comedy" (90). George Monteiro, however, faults Edmonds for a simplistic analysis. Monteiro notes in "The Put-down in Carson McCullers' 'Correspondence,'" that the story is a "conversion of life into art" (4). Basing his argument upon the irony of the story's title (since the communication only goes one way), Monteiro finds parallels between the rising "frustration, irritation, and annoyance" of the narrator and McCullers' relationship with her husband, Reeves, who failed to answer many of her letters while she attended Yaddo, an artist's colony in Saratoga Springs, New York (5). I appreciate both critics' analysis, especially since there is so little criticism available, yet neither takes his argument far enough. It is true that the story shows McCullers' perceptive characterization of female adolescence, her ability to portray "adolescent girls who are on the outside yearning to become part

of a ‘we’” as Edmonds suggests (91). And, as always, the autobiographical element is easy to uncover, as Monteiro argues. In addition to these ideas, however, one finds a study of the expectations of a female at a certain point in her life. Over the course of the four letters, an evolution from hope to indifference occurs if one simply traces the change in tone.

Additionally, the argument can be made that the letters are movements of a single musical piece. Each successive letter is shorter, more dramatic, and more serious than the one before it, showing the progression of the movements from flighty melody to somber death march. The four letters can also be separately analyzed as a quartet of voices. Based upon the ideas of Bakhtin and polyphony, these voices are performances in which Henrietta tries to determine an acceptable voice. She, like McCullers’ other female characters, is just trying to be heard. The first letter, the soprano voice, is the most feminine and is full of expectation and hope. Henrietta plays her feminine part to perfection. The second letter, the alto voice, begins to second guess and doubt; it begins to show the separation of Henrietta from her expected romantic role. The third letter, the tenor, is hollow and shows the harshness of a more male tone without the strength behind it; Henrietta has begun to try an alternate persona. And the last letter, the bass voice, marks a complete change, and, perhaps, the coldness of a death of sorts. McCullers develops Henrietta through her disappointment, yet she ends the story

ambiguously. The reader does not have a clear sense of who Henrietta becomes. She has been stunted by an experience and hardened to such an extreme that she behaves in a manner that covers her hurt. She writes, "I cannot waste any more of my valuable time writing to you" (*CS* 124). She becomes one of many female grotesques that are, as Phillips writes, "immobilized as spiritual isolates of circumstance" (66).

"Breath from the Sky" is one of McCullers' early stories and depicts the invalidism of a fourteen or fifteen-year-old girl, Constance, who suffers from advanced tuberculosis. The story revolves around Constance's thoughts and misunderstandings about her imminent move to a sanitarium for treatment. Resting outside, she feels virtually ignored by her family as they enjoy a beautiful summer day around her and leave her to be cared for by her nurse, Miss Whelan. The story encapsulates Constance's struggle to understand what appears to be her mother's rejection because of her illness and her fear that her siblings will live the rest of their lives without remembering her. A search on "Breath from the Sky" in the MLA Bibliography returns no criticism. Internet search engines likewise. Even Virginia Spencer Carr includes only a meager two paragraphs on the story—statements regarding its autobiographical nature and its situation as a basic mood piece. Yet, there is a continuation of a persistent theme in this little known story.

Constance is an adolescent of the sort McCullers zooms in on most often. She struggles with her own sense of alienation to such an extent that she loses all sense of identity. As often depicted, her alienation is due to her own misunderstanding or distortion of her circumstances. And, McCullers presents the situation through musical allusions.

Writers often use musical tropes to describe storms, yet this story takes place on a sunny summer day. One cannot routinely consider the use of the grotesque in relation to such a beautiful environment, but when the environment is twisted into something so entirely its opposite, both the natural setting and the events of the story are distorted fantastically. Everything surrounding Constance is vibrant and healthy, even the family dog. The daily routine that goes on around her (and without her) as she lies in her bed only serves to heighten the helplessness of her physical situation. She is the complete antithesis of her surroundings and is hyper-sensitive to the vibrancy and life she sees. Instead of the imagery or force of nature as music, McCullers highlights certain calming aspects of nature—the fringing sky, the droning bees, the spirea blossoms—as a constant rhythm against which Constance's own condition sounds dramatic and discordant notes. She inverts the typical metaphors in order to highlight Constance's state of being. The nurse's loud voice booms "loud enough to shatter the fragile sprays of the spirea so that the thousands of tiny blossoms would float down, down, down in a magic

kaleidoscope of whiteness. Silent whiteness" (*CS* 27). Additionally, Constance's ragged coughs become discordant chords, her shortening of breath becomes the piece's rests, and then the gasps that follow quicken the pace leading to the moment of crescendo McCullers always builds toward. Even the chugging of the car engine, Constance's own unconvincing laughter, and the howling of the dog are audible. I find more than an exercise in expository writing, more than a "mood piece," here.

Just as "Wunderkind" analyzes female adolescence and the burgeoning understanding of relationships with men, "Breath from the Sky" looks at a woman's position within the family. As an adolescent Constance misreads her mother's reaction to her illness as neglect and rejection when, in fact, the reader feels the mother's obvious pain and realizes her actions are efforts to cover it. She repeatedly turns away from her daughter so that Constance cannot see her anguished face. The miscommunication is audibly expressed through the juxtaposition of the beautiful scenery with harsh sounds. In fact, the dramatic moment in the story comes when Constance bravely forces her mother to talk to her, making sure she looks her in the eyes. In this one moment, she is in tune with nature instead of screaming out against it: "She felt her pulse quiver at her finger tips like a bee on a flower—vibrate against the cool glass" (*CS* 31). Sadly, though

Constance reaches out, her mother does not understand that she views the move to the sanitarium as her family throwing her away.

The diminution of the story comes when her mother leaves her with a look of "strange stillness—a hollow restfulness" (*CS* 34). Constance's coughs then become smothering; the musical piece and the story die out to reverberating coughs that "beat at her chest like great blows risen from some unknown part inside her. They came, one after another with equal force. And when the last toneless one had wrenched itself clear she was so tired that she hung with unresisting limpness on the chair arm, wondering if the strength to raise her dizzy head would ever again be hers" (*CS* 35). In this piece, music is intimately joined with the sense of temporality that Constance feels. She cannot fulfill her role as daughter. The story ends with Constance in a state of misdevelopment and fateful loneliness as if the misunderstanding between daughter and mother has pushed Constance to a permanent place of non-identity.

In "Court in the West Eighties," a nameless eighteen-year-old university student records the scene around her as she struggles to survive in New York City during the 1930s. She notices a fellow student who stuffs newspapers into his clothes to try to stay warm, the hunger of her neighbors whose doorstep milk bottles gradually decrease to nothing, and the strange loneliness of her boarding

house, but mostly she notices her red-haired neighbor, a man of fatherly age to whom she directs her unspoken needs. The man provides a sense of security and peace with his "humming three notes over and over" (*CS* 13). She sees him as the only melody in the building, the "soundless pit that would never awaken" that she considers her home (*CS* 12); his mere presence adds order to the chaos around her. But in this strange circumstance of concentric existences among closely packed neighbors, there is an overwhelming heaviness presented through McCullers' interweaving of absolute silence. As the narrator envisions the lives of her neighbors, so close that each knows the other's daily routine, especially the muffled sounds each makes, there is a feeling of isolation as if she begins to understand the insignificance of these lives that cannot be heard. Just as "Breath from the Sky" foregrounds the sounds of illness against the serene music of nature, "Court in the West Eighties" juxtaposes sound itself, whether music or fighting or the sounds of spring, with silence. McCullers juxtaposes incongruent things in order to transgress boundaries and highlight the silent, tragic scenes that play out daily in unsuspecting environments.

Throughout the story, the young female narrator *hears* disturbing events unfold, but never feels empowered to help in the situations of her neighbors. She hears screaming at the cellist's annoying practicing, the nervous pregnant woman pacing, and the young husband railing in frustration because he has lost his job.

The sounds increase in poignancy, leading up to the climactic choking sounds coming from the room of the starving couple whose milk bottles she had watched decrease. With this dramatic sound, the narrator frantically thinks the man should "*do something, do something*" (*CS* 18). She expects the red-haired man to intervene and set things aright in the court. When the father figure does not respond to the desperation of the young couple, the narrator is confused. Afterward, when things are silent again, she thinks, "It is not easy to explain about this faith I had in him. I don't know what I could have expected him to do, but the feeling was there just the same" (*CS* 16). The narrator's thoughts reveal how she has been socialized to see the man as a father figure who will care take for the others; she never realizes her own unwillingness to act.

Perhaps the plot of the story may be summarized as that of a young woman trying to understand her relationship to her neighbors who are strangers on one level, intimates on another. The narrator, who teeters between adolescence and adulthood, questions the determination of stranger versus friend, especially among those who see one another daily and know intimate details of one another's lives. She feels the irony of being surrounded by people, but still being alone. She thinks:

> 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. We were

> near enough to throw our food into each others' windows, near enough so that a single machine gun could have killed us all together in a flash. And still we acted as strangers. (*CS* 16)

At what point does one begin to make eye contact and admit the "knowing" of the other? McCullers places an eighteen-year-old in this situation purposely as she continues to study the emotional understanding of women in different stages of life, but the older, red-haired man seems to support her particularly female performance. The narrator's naive understanding of human behavior and her expectations of the older, fatherly man keep her in her place (also keeping her from action in helping her troubled neighbors). There is the sense that no one else but the man could have intervened in the tragic scene. She never once thinks that *she* might be able to do something. And, when the man does not help, she hopes to simply *hear his words* so that she might learn.

It is interesting that the narrator slowly develops a desire for a fuller understanding (she questions how neighbors can live so close, know so much about each other, but not *know* each other), and that McCullers only provides her with half-truths. Whether by allowing her only half the story of her neighbors (through just her hearing incidents in their lives), or by handicapping her by indicating that the books she chooses to read are those that she borrows from a *male* friend—books that make things the narrator has half known become "definite

and sure" (12)—McCullers allows no hope for the narrator to have any authentic voice. Though McCullers teases the boundaries of feminine identity, she quickly undercuts the narrator's questioning with masculine authority. The narrator thinks, "I still have this feeling that there is something in him that could change a lot of situations and straighten them out" (*CS* 19).

To be sure, one does not read "Court in the West Eighties" and immediately think the narrator to be a female grotesque. But placed in the position of being a performer on a stage with no other sense of individuality or identity, she stops being female and becomes a caricature supporting the social positioning affirmed by the red-haired man. One cannot truly label the narrator as human woman wholly and completely because she is not in possession of her thoughts or actions. She is more of a being in a state of in-between and, as such, one must begin to unpack the complexities of what that means. To repeat the thinking of Russo as expressed in *The Female Grotesque*, this particular type of grotesque causes one to "rethink the category of the grotesque in relation to deviance, temporality, and liberation in a different context" (ix). It is not that McCullers' female characters are liberated, but that through their internal warring of identity they question whether liberation is possible. For McCullers' women, it is not.

Sadly, since liberation is unattainable, what happens is that when McCullers' female characters cannot "find themselves," they create their own

false reality and choose to live in it. For instance, initially, "Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland" appears to be the tale of a wannabe—a woman who must pretend to know the elite to be elite herself. Closer reading, however, reveals a more serious (or sinister) actuality in that Madame Zilensky lives in her own illusions. Selected to join the faculty of the music department at Ryder College, Madame Zilensky has an impeccable reputation as a musician and as a teacher, but something about her is unsettling to Mr. Brook who is responsible for her joining the faculty. Beyond her grandiose exaggerations in conversation, he notices that her focus is upon her music to such an extent that she panics over the loss of a metronome more so than over the loss of the entire family's luggage during their relocation. In addition, she seems dazed and he begins to notice that she hardly sleeps, staying in her studio through the night working on her compositions. Mr. Brook analyzes that "day and night she had drudged and struggled and thrown her soul into her work, and there was not much of her left over for anything else. Being human, she suffered from a lack and did what she could to make up for it" (*CS* 115). Gradually, Mr. Brook begins to understand that Madame Zilensky is a pathological liar—a diagnosis he confirms when her latest tale involves seeing the King of Finland.

The story is reminiscent of McCullers' own statement in "The Flowering Dream" that "reality alone has never been that important to me . . . the imagination

is truer than reality" (279, 281). McCullers explains that after writing the story of a deaf mute in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, a convention of deaf mutes occurred in a nearby town. Her husband assumed that she would want to go, but McCullers writes, "It was the last thing I wanted to do because I had already made my conception of deaf mutes and I didn't want it to be disturbed" (276). For McCullers' female characters, a private, personal reality is better than any truth. Likewise, Mr. Brook comes to realize that for Madame Zilensky, "through the lies, she lived vicariously" (*CS* 115). And, he cannot be the one that destroys her. As he points out to her that there is no King of Finland, he watches her deteriorate before his eyes: "But he could not finish. Her face stopped him. She was deadly pale and there were shadows around her mouth. Her eyes were wide open, doomed . . . And Mr. Brook suddenly felt like a murderer" (*CS* 117).

Likewise in "Poldi," Poldi Klein chooses to remain in her own self-made reality; she seeks wholeness through pursuing a perfect love relationship. The mere dream of love seems to make her happy. Moreover, the story contains multiple layers of metaphor relating love (or the mastery of love) to the mastery of music. Poldi practices feverishly to perform perfectly, and to "sound spiritual" and lift listeners to a higher plane (*CS* 22). Comparing love to music, Poldi thinks, "It's only after you've suffered that you can play" (*CS* 22). Indeed, Poldi is at a pivotal moment in her life when she must decide whether to hold on to her illusion

of the perfect and unknown "we" and continue to strive to find it or let her guard down and accept something she views as less. These stories ask, what is more important—the truth or a woman feeling sure of identity? As Robert Phillips writes, "Madame Zilensky's need for illusions in order to exist is greater than her unmasker's need for truth. Indeed, he feels he will have killed her if he continues to confront her" (178). Madame Zilensky and Poldi both live in their own self-created realities, using imitation to try to come to terms with what it means to be female and asserting that McCullers finds no hope for her female characters outside of their male-directed paradigms.

McCullers' critical reputation waned after the success of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, *The Member of the Wedding,* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*; the physical and personal pain she endured may have taken a toll on her creative work. Her nineteen short stories are summarily treated by most biographers and, with a few exceptions, are almost entirely neglected by literary critics. Six stories are reviewed with some degree of regularity: "Wunderkind," "Madame Zilensky and the King of Finland," "A Domestic Dilemma," "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud.," "The Sojourner," and "The Jockey." Little or no published criticism exists on many of the other stories, some of which I have included in this study. Critics note that the fiction published after 1951, i.e.

after *The Ballad of the Sad Café: The Novels and Stories of Carson McCullers*, was of inferior quality. But the stories do have merit. In them, though there are few physical freaks, the characterization for which the author is most known, there are multitudes of female grotesques created through the loss of identity through being forced into a feminine performance that is incongruent with their sense of self. Often, the stories are more about internal conceptualization than outward action, or as Robert Phillips argues, they reveal "an inner freaking out" (173). Perhaps Adelaide Frazier says it best when she refers to the destruction these characters feel as, "A self-destruction tied to interior monologues by lovers who recognize themselves as doomed residents of an alien territory" (Frazier 77). The characters come to represent McCullers' own desperation and frustration with the lack of freedom of identity she sees in women, often because of their positioning in relationships.

McCullers' characters search for a fuller understanding of love, become frustrated with what they find, and are unable to open themselves up for more. They create for themselves a sort of destructive love in a self-created world. Since McCullers herself was so intricately involved with music, many, if not all of her pieces include some element of musicality. When ones begins to notice this, when one begins to see that she is a composer arranging characters like voices into a fugue, one begins to realize that she never lets go of her authorial control. For

many authors, this is a respectable trait. For McCullers, it is disappointing. In the end, she only recreates her own distorted and unattainable vision of love in her doomed characters. It is a sad ending to a personal search that ends in frustration and untapped potential—she is immortalized as a huntress of the heart who died before finding what she was looking for. McCullers rushes her female characters toward a dramatic moment when they might find identity for themselves while also finding love or without losing the love they already possess. And then, before the character can obtain both love and identity, she abruptly stops, leaving the women half-finished, an incomplete composition.