

**Freaks, the Grotesque, and Other Sideshow Attractions in the  
Fiction of Carson McCullers**

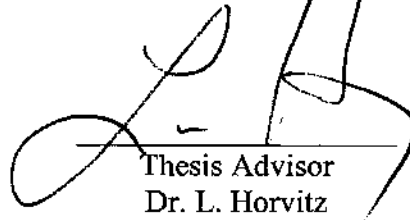
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## **Freaks, the Grotesque, and Other Sideshow Attractions in the Fiction of Carson McCullers**

In 1940 *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* was published, thrusting a twenty-three year old Carson McCullers into the spotlight as an overnight literary success. She became the latest ingénue to break through—lauded as “the literary discovery of the year” (Savigneau 65). Early literary scholarship surrounding her work utilized gender studies and feminist thought, but the recent criticism incorporates a more postmodern lens and approaches her work from new discussions within gender studies, including the advent of queer theory studies. McCullers writes of the “freak” and the “grotesque,” and as these terms shift and change in culture, the critical conversation surrounding her work likewise changes. Through her use of the freak and the grotesque, considering here the novels *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), what is McCullers saying about the body and tensions of identity? How does her work engage with recent debates on gender and sexuality? McCullers’ fiction is populated by freaks who defy the imposition of “normal” categories of gender. It is this intersection of the freak and the grotesque *with* gender and sexual anomaly, especially regarding the body and identity construction, that is ripe for analysis within her fiction.

McCullers is most often associated with the literary school of Southern grotesque, or Southern gothic. In a literary context, as defined in the *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, grotesque is “most commonly employed to denote the ridiculous, bizarre, extravagant, freakish and unnatural; in short, aberrations from the desirable

norms of harmony, balance, and proportion” (367). Drawn directly from her Georgia origins, McCullers’s characters, too, are prevalently “freakish” figures—alienated and deviating—overcharged with an underlying distortion that is representative of the strangeness peculiar to the author and her writing. McCullers’s vision, and connection to the Southern grotesque, is an allegory of existential anguish, and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding* are powerful narratives that speak to the difficult dynamics of identity construction. Indeed, they go beyond a surface reading of the texts as mere fictional accounts of volatile adolescent rebellion to explore the trope of the freak and grotesque.

In her biography, *Carson McCullers: A Life*, Josyane Savigneau quotes from the author’s outline accompanying the original manuscript of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, in it McCullers stated: “The broad principal theme of this book is indicated in the first dozen pages. This is the theme of man’s revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as is possible...Human beings are innately cooperative, but an unnatural social tradition makes them behave in ways that are not in accord with their deepest nature” (61-62). It is precisely this theme that one of the main characters, Mick Kelly, is struggling with as a female adolescent “coming into her own”—the conditions that society expects from her in terms of femininity and identity as a whole is “not in accord with her deepest nature.” Likewise in *The Member of the Wedding*, within the character of Frankie Addams, McCullers again depicts a closed Southern world in which an adolescent speaks her unease and loneliness over the course of a few months. “It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old,” begins the novel. “She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie

had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid” (*MW* 257). McCullers’ fiction is made up of unhappy dreamers who muse about the world. These characters look for ways out of the rooms and houses that enclose their loneliness, these walls more often being a metaphor for confinement within a set of conventions that denies individuality.

Hence, we have McCuller’s deep fascination and preoccupation with loneliness that comprises the lives of her freaks. This time it manifests in the forms of female adolescent girls attempting to ascertain their roles according to gender and identity. Mick and Frankie do evoke adolescence as a delirious spasm of energy, but their experiences also speak to the deeper meaning of identity. Additionally, these adolescent girls are particularly amenable to an exploration of the grotesque since their bodies are in that liminal state between childhood and adulthood. In the case of Mick and Frankie, written as tomboys, their bodies are also between masculine and feminine gender identification.

It is evident that a critical lens of gender studies is apropos regarding this work on McCullers’s fiction. Additionally, utilizing the critical perspective of new historicism, in conjunction with gender studies, will be advantageous in its illumination of the numerous layers in McCullers’s texts. The literary theory of new historicism calls for history to be viewed more skeptically, but also more broadly; history includes all of the cultural, social, political, and anthropological discourses at work in any given age (Cuddon 545). These various “texts” are unranked—any text may yield information valuable in understanding a particular milieu (546). Rather than forming a backdrop, the many discourses at work at any given time affect both an author and his/her text; both are inescapably part of a social construct. Likewise, McCullers’s fiction offers important

insights regarding the ways in which gender and sexual relations are interconnected throughout self, society, and nature, without collapsing the distinctions among them.

McCullers's fiction—through her use of the freak and the grotesque—is an attempt to both reconcile and revolt against the proscribed gender norms, present both then and now. Initially, literary critics approached McCullers' use of the freak and the grotesque from a biographical critical standpoint—attributing its implementation as mere representation of her personal struggles with gender and sexuality. Indeed, it is evident that McCullers' own struggles against oppressive social norms caused her to identify with the suffering of others. While this is valid in some respects, recent criticism has diverged from a biographical reading of her fiction, allowing the texts to stand alone and speak for themselves. Significantly, new historicism also emphasizes the interaction between the historic context of a work and a modern reader's understanding and interpretation of the work (Meyer 591). New historicists attempt to read a period in all of its dimensions, as noted above, and remind us that there is not only one historic context for a text.

A look at the national landscape during the time in which McCullers was writing reveals the emergence of the Civil Rights movement and feminism. On one hand, liberalism was growing but, on the other, segregation and repressive sexual mores were still painfully prevalent. An emphasis and insistence on normalcy was widespread during McCullers' lifetime, and as she questioned it in her fiction it was also being challenged in other facets of society. For example, McCullers uses the freak show in *The Member of the Wedding* to challenge strict gender divisions. While in the scientific world, the release of the Kinsey Report in 1948 shocked the nation with its sensational study of the sexual behavior of males. In 1953 another study was published, this time addressing the

sexual behavior of females (D'Emilio 268). Like McCullers, Kinsey challenged strict gender divisions by revealing that homosexuality was, indeed, prominent—and additionally revealing other sexual practices that were not socially accepted or considered mainstream. While McCullers uses freaks on the stage of the side show pavilion to display gender and sexual deviance for the audience, the Kinsey Report suggests that the “freaks” have already infiltrated society—suggesting that human sexual behavior is multi-faceted and has been severely repressed. In bringing such subversive material to the forefront, both Kinsey and McCullers apply the image of the freak to question the normative expectations already in place in the high stakes of identity construction, especially in terms of gender and sexuality.

In effect, McCullers's fiction and the Kinsey Report both raise questions of what it means to be considered normal or deviant. Assuming a scientific tone and stance, Kinsey stripped aside the veneer of post-World War II America to reveal homoerotic desires and practices among men (D'Emilio 294). Juxtaposing McCullers' use of the freak show with the Kinsey Report raises interesting questions regarding the *visibility* of deviance. This desire for normalcy reflects a cultural obsession with conformity characteristic of Cold War America that continues to be prevalent today. Obviously, it was considered much more unconventional during McCullers's lifetime to question the underpinnings of gender and sexuality, for one was expected to subsume their identity according to their gender, thereby establishing a fixed identity. Upon examination, it is evident in the fiction of Carson McCullers that she did not condone these rigid societal expectations and the characters she created questioned such standards and attempted to

defy them. Her use of the freak and the grotesque is emblematic of her response to the modes of behavior that were so narrowly circumscribed within society.

Although the significance of the freak and the sideshow is far-reaching within her text, on the surface the word “freak” typically connotes individuals of a by-gone era, of a time when freak show carnivals were commonplace and a popular form of entertainment. It conjures the image of the sideshow stage inhabited by the Bearded Lady, the Half-Man Half-Woman, the Dwarf, the Giant, the Native Savage, and so on. McCullers’ adolescent characters resist normative claims in terms of identity, and they identify, and are identified, with the figures of the freak show. The term “freak” is a voluntary sign of nonconformity for some, and an intolerable slur for others. In either case, “freak” can be understood as a social construction, a configuration of bodily forms and behaviors.

Leslie Fiedler claims that the bodies of freaks evoke collective fears and desires that challenge our fundamental beliefs about the boundaries of the human. As previously mentioned, freaks and the grotesque are prevalent themes in the fiction of Carson McCullers’. She uses them to represent the problems of gender and sexual identity construction. Therefore, through a contemporary lens, how does McCullers’s fiction challenge the traditional ideas about gender and sexuality? Her adolescents identify with the freaks and the grotesque, in particular resembling the impulse of the grotesque that cannot endure the contours of normal identity. Reconsidering the trope of the freak reveals that it does not merely signal adolescent oddness, especially in terms of the failure to conform. Instead it represents an unfinished form of subjectivity regarding gender and identity, just as Mick and Frankie fluctuate between boyishness and girlishness throughout their respective narratives.

In the 1960's Ellen Moers and Leslie Fiedler were both critics of McCullers's fiction. In her book *Literary Women*, Moers discusses the nature of form in McCullers's fiction, particularly the modern female gothic. She asserts that "McCullers cloaks with humorous tenderness her unsentimental perception of the freakish self as originating in female adolescence. McCullers is at her best with creatures poised on a sharp, thin line between opposites: of sex, of race, of age" (108). Moers places her within the context of the Southern American gothic, of which William Faulkner is undeniably most well-known, yet she also claims the importance of the feminine theme in McCullers' works, outlining some early feminist theory ideas.

Fiedler, in his book, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, discusses the plight of quiet despair in the world of the freak in fiction. He analyzes the images of alienation, flight, and fear in American novels and further questions why these themes are so prevalent. He purports that the core of this is, in part, due to the problems associated with the American dream. Fiedler suggests that certain novelists "held in common the hope of breaking through all limits and restraints, of reaching a place of total freedom where one could with impunity deny the Fall, live as if innocence rather than guilt were the birthright of all men" (143). Fiedler locates McCullers more generally within "the homosexual-gothic novelists," whom he defines according to their "homosexual sensibility" in the figure of the adolescent. He argues that McCullers's adolescents, "like the circus freaks, the deaf and the dumb," serve as a symbol not only of innocence but also of exclusion: "They project the inverts exclusion from the family, his sense of heterosexual passion as a threat and an offence; and this awareness is easily translated into the child's bafflement before weddings or honeymoons or copulation itself" (476).



The contentions of Fiedler and Moers are also engaged in later scholarship, but the more recent criticism goes further in considering the constant interplay of the masculine and feminine, for example, which lies at the basis of the grotesque in McCullers's texts. Russian philosopher and literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin has produced a great deal of writing that includes studies of the grotesque. His model of grotesque realism has had a huge influence in recent studies of the grotesque and cultural politics. In Bakhtin's book, *Rabelais and His World*, the grotesque—as both a literary mode and a model of subjectivity—is one of excess and a violent meeting of incompatible elements. Bakhtin asserts that “we find at the basis of grotesque imagery a special concept of the body as a whole and of the limits of this whole. The confines between the body and the world, and between separate bodies, are drawn in the grotesque genre quite differently than in the classic and naturalist images” (315). In this way, writes Bakhtin, the grotesque “seeks to grasp in its imagery the very act of becoming and growth, the eternal incomplete unfinished nature of being” (52). McCullers also portrays binaries in her fiction—the male and female, the normal and deviant— suggesting the reversibility of masculine and feminine identity.

In the novels considered here, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*, inversion takes place predominantly in the realm of gender and sexuality. McCullers's work is in line with Bakhtin's assertions regarding the grotesque, as well as the work of theorist Judith Butler within gender studies. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler views the transsexual/transgender body not as a freakish anomaly, but as evidence that human sexuality is more varied than the categories of male/female allow (67). McCullers's assertions, through her “freakish” characters, precede Butler's descriptions

of the transsexual body as a site where rigid distinctions between sexes and genders break down. McCullers's texts also conjure up the powerful and crucial element of the "unfinished," which parallels Bakhtin's grotesque that is always in process, always in the act of becoming (28). Further, Bakhtin notes that the grotesque body "is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (317). The grotesque as it appears in McCullers's texts has much in common with Bakhtin's account, an account that illuminates both the limitations and strange possibilities of the body.

In 1985 Louise Westling performed a feminist read of the grotesque in McCullers's texts in her book *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*. Her feminist approach theorized the grotesque; she used it to refer to the freakish or abnormal within southern women's fiction. Westling considers the grotesque, in McCullers's writing, in terms of the constraints of female identity. That is, the woman who does not conform to cultural demands of ideal womanhood is a frightening, grotesque figure. She also focuses on the painful ambiguity of female identity as figured in the image of the female adolescent. Westling examines McCullers' problem of identity construction for females in consideration of the role and treatment of women in that generation, signifying that it was difficult to imagine alternative life-styles for women at that time. She notes that although the mask of the southern belle and "the lady" began to peel away, there was no alternative model of female identity (37). In *The Member of the Wedding*, the "southern lady" ideal is imaged in the neighborhood club members, whom Frankie watches from the kitchen window. These girls refuse Frankie entry into their club as a result of her tomboy nature, and also come to represent the "ideal femininity" for Frankie to emulate.

For Mick it is her older sister, Etta, who provides this role model. Etta is perpetually primping and thinks about movie stars while practicing her chin exercises before the mirror (*THLH* 40-41).

Westling also examines clothing and the problems it reveals regarding sexual and gender identification. The tomboys in McCullers's fiction are outfitted in typical tomboy style: barefooted, hair cropped short, wearing undershirts and boys' shorts. On the rare occasions when these characters do wear dresses and attempt to be feminine, it is as if they have adorned costumes and Westling suggests "it is a deliberate and very awkward capitulation to social demands for conformity" (177). She concludes that McCullers's tomboys are "ambitious, artistic girls who are disoriented and terrified when they are forced to identify themselves as female at puberty" (114). In fact, many of McCullers's female characters identify themselves as freaks because of their inability to perform expected gender roles or successfully don the required accouterments of femininity.

Readings of gender in McCullers's work is, of course, not new, but paradigms shift and change—allowing the space for new discussion of previous issues. As noted earlier, Judith Butler's work, within the field of gender studies, is incredibly apt to be deployed in a study of McCullers's characters. In an article entitled "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Psychological Research," Lisa Cosgrove examines Butler's idea of gender as performance. In it, gender is not considered a construct of a specific sexual identity; it is rather an enactment, a performed moment, in which sexual identity "becomes" through the moment of enactment in the body (98). In recent years, scholarly debate on sexuality and gender has discussed the terms "constructionism" versus "essentialism." In other words, are sexuality and gender historically and socially

constituted or “constructed,” or are they eternally identical, pre-socially given, personality-penetrating “essences?” (88).

Butler’s work has become widely influential in cultural and social studies of gender and sexuality. She aims to transcend constructionism and essentialism by elucidating how a sexed and racialized body and subject is created (94). Butler addresses the ways in which femininity and masculinity are symbolized, repressed, and resisted in contemporary culture—her work deconstructs, rather than regulates, gender difference (92). Language for Butler is productive and serves as an important bridge between the personal and the social. Butler’s research on gender implies that it originates from a complex interplay between the psyche and performance (97). From a postmodern perspective in Butler’s work, Cosgrove suggests that “gender is neither acquired nor innate and instead becomes reconceptualized as both an idealized presence and prohibition” (97). Using Butler and her theories as a lens for McCullers’ use of the freak and the grotesque affirms both the body and gender transgressions that are evident in her fiction. McCullers challenges the “normal” within the forms of identity construction which seek to constrain, especially evident in her utilization of the promise of adolescence. Mick and Frankie stand on metaphorical and literal thresholds of choice, in which their individual identities are influenced through the disciplines of “appropriate” fashion, behavior, and desires—as well as the ever-present threat of being labeled a “freak.”

Within Butler’s feminist theories of sexual difference, she has articulated the conceptions of this difference and reconfigured “the body.” If bodies are rendered as subject to interpretation, as she suggests, rather than as given, static things, then our

formulations of identity and subjectivity are recast. The situations in which Mick and Frankie assume gender as performance may be highlighted as examples of Butler's theory. Upon entering vocational high school, Mick finds that she does not belong or conform to any of the already established cliques. Therefore, she decides to host a prom party at her home in order to break the ice with her new classmates. When the day of the party arrives, Mick, normally attired in "khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes," (*THLH* 18), must scramble for clothing that represents "proper" femininity. Her sister, Etta, is always enforcing rigid gender expectations on Mick, especially when she declares: "It makes me sick to see you in those silly boy's clothes. Somebody ought to clamp down on you, Mick Kelly, and make you behave" (42); that is, Mick ought to be made to behave like a "true" woman. It is this same sister whom Mick turns to when she needs feminine adornment for the party. From the reader's perspective, it seems absurd when Mick dresses in "Etta's long blue crepe de chine evening dress, and some white pumps and a rhinestone tiara" (*THLH* 97). This transformation is obviously extreme, but it is the ideal she believes she is supposed to strive for.

Frankie has a similar experience when she is planning her outfit for her brother's wedding. Frankie chooses a dramatic orange satin evening dress and silver shoes. She asks the nanny, Berenice, for her opinion: "It just don't do," she replies. "You had all your hair shaved off like a convict, and now you tie a silver ribbon around this head without any hair... Here you got on this grown woman's evening dress, orange satin... and that brown crust on your elbows. The two things just don't mix" (*MW* 331), prompting Berenice to describe her as a "human Christmas tree in August" (*MW* 332). These instances reveal the adolescent's struggle to appropriate "proper" femininity, but they

misconstrue it and unwittingly undermine the notion of ideal womanhood. As the characters don “femininity,” they both misrepresent it and reveal its impractical nature, for the oppressive burden of social expectation cannot accommodate the girls’ own version of becoming, or their difference.

Exploring this idea of donning the “right” or “wrong” femininity is also discussed by Sarah Gleeson-White in her article, “A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness: Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O’Connor.” Gleeson-White discusses a minor character in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*: Baby Wilson. This little girl lives on Mick’s block and is constantly parading herself around the neighborhood doing handsprings, a four-year-old beauty-queen-wannabe with the tutu and perm to prove it. Picture the modern day equivalent found in the form of the late Jon-Benet Ramsey, ill-fated child-star of Boulder, Colorado. Both children, one fictional and one real, were catapulted into an adult version of idealized “femininity.” This has a nightmarish result in that femininity is forced, literally painted on to these children whose actual development has not even occurred yet.

According to Gleeson-White, Baby is “over-done, over-feminized, so that she is a grotesque parody of southern womanhood” (52). She contends that McCullers is mocking and satirizing this perfect idea of femininity, suggesting its painful limits while also ridiculing it. Notably, Mick’s little brother, Bubber, is playing with a shotgun and accidentally shoots Baby, non-fatally. Gleeson-White asks: “What more cutting critique of idealized modes of femininity could there be?” (53). McCullers uses Baby to present a parody of the image of ideal femininity. The parody is effective; revealing Baby to be

hideous in her costume of femininity. Thereby, when Bubber shoots her, the image itself is taken down.

Within McCullers's characters, this effort to assume idealized versions of gender is problematic. The struggle and contentions that stem from an attempt to obey societal expectations is revealed. Gleeson-White insists that "McCullers's freaks are not exclusively symbolic of the alienating (and sexually indifferent) human condition. Rather, they intimately engage issues of subjectivity in the material realms of gender and sexuality" (48). McCullers consciously chooses to use the terms "freak" and "queer," in an effort to describe the characters along this gender/identity axis. Effectively, these terms do not connote any fixed identity, but a broad opposition to normative behaviors and social distinctions. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin writes that "the mask ...rejects conformity to oneself and is related to metamorphoses, the violation of natural boundaries and to mockery...Such manifestations as parodies, caricatures, and eccentric postures...reveal the grotesque" (40). The image of the masquerade and performance is linked with the fashioning of self. Although there are no literal masquerade scenes in any of McCullers's novels, clothing as costume strongly implicates the different modes of the characters, exemplified earlier in Mick's and Frankie's attempts at appropriating femininity.

In *The Member of the Wedding*, gender as masquerade is also succinctly expressed by a secondary character, Lily Mae Jenkins. In this scene, the nanny, Berenice, is trying to explain the nature of relationships to Frankie. She chooses to use an interesting example, and an ultimately confusing one, regarding a transgender individual in their town. Berenice declares: "Now this Lily Mae fell in love with a man

name Juney Jones. A man, mind you. And Lily Mae turned into a girl. He changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl" (*MW* 324). Berenice was discussing an example of an alternative relationship to Frankie, but this account also affirms the transformative power of gender as costume. In Berenice's "queer" story, gender becomes a matter of preference; the body literally evolves to conform in costume to its inhabitant's desires and Bakhtin's metamorphosis is, thus, set in motion. Likewise, in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Biff Brannon, the local café owner, performs this concept of gender transvestism by enacting feminine traits in an attempt to search for an ideal whole self. This also further reinforces Lisa Cosgrove's discussion of Judith Butler's argument that "proper" femininity is performative, since it involves the repetition of certain acts and gestures that are consistent within the received norms of gender identity.

In more recent criticism on McCullers's fiction, Sarah Gleeson-White also discusses gender as masquerade or performance in another article: "A 'Calculable Woman' and a 'Jittery Ninny': Performing Femininity in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*." Again the character of Biff Brannon is analyzed as he appropriates femininity in private through the application of feminine cosmetics belonging to his dead wife (53). Also, after his wife died, Biff changed the entire style of their apartment into a more opulent design. From the public's eye he is viewed as very masculine and stoic: he quietly stands behind the counter of his café with his dark beard and his arms perpetually crossed. In an attempt to perform both genders, he constructs his gendered self in terms of perfume, hair rinse, and interior decorating. He appropriates what he considers his "real self" only after his wife dies and he is free to assume certain



feminine characteristics in the privacy of his single life, undermining the notion of gender as essential and natural (54).

Throughout *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* Biff also expresses the desire to become a mother. His maternal affections are most often directed, in his thoughts, at his niece, Baby, and Mick—since the novel is told in third person, the reader is privy to his thoughts. It is a strange maternal instinct that Biff maintains, for he also repeatedly notices Mick's developing adolescent body: "He thought of her hoarse, boyish voice and of her habit of hitching up her khaki shorts and swaggering like a cowboy in the picture show. A feeling of tenderness came in him. He was uneasy" (*THLH* 22). Biff's longing to exhibit care and affection combined with his recognition of Mick's emerging sexual development merges as an uncomfortable mixture of maternal longing and male sexual desire.

Further, Gleeson-White alleges that McCullers engages in a project of social criticism throughout her works. In the longing and suffering of her characters, the inconsistencies at the center of the social order emerge and must be addressed (57). Gleeson-White implies, as well as in the work of Butler, that McCullers's characters combine qualities of masculine and feminine to suggest that sexuality is based on a continuum rather than a strict binary opposition. Further, this directly correlates with McCullers's clever use of the Half Man-Half Woman character in the side show, for this character challenges the assumption that all bodies must be one sex or the other. This appropriation is presented in the form of costume: "The left side was a man and the right side a woman. The costume on the left was a leopard skin and on the right side a brassiere and a spangled skirt...Both eyes were strange" (*MW* 272). The clothing creates

a superficial appearance of freakishness while implying that it may correspond to a radical sexual division beneath the costume. Within this situation, McCullers offers her female adolescents a freak that represents both man and woman, evenly divided into opposing camps, at a tense stand-off within one body.

Patricia Yaeger, in her book *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing: 1930-1990*, has recently argued that McCullers's fiction is far more historically and politically engaged than critics have recognized. In weaving together southern women writers, Yaeger opens a critical space in which we can see the forgotten bodies of the south informing and constituting one another in unexpected ways. She examines "this panoply of bodies in process or bodies in pain, this parade of beings on the rim, the painful margins of southern society, appear without ceasing in stories by southern women" (219), and she wonders—why? She discusses the body as "a site of disturbance, uneasiness, and pleasure that suggests a dual function for southern grotesques" (222). Yaeger looks at the body through a postmodern grotesque lens and views it as fragmented. She suggests that the modern grotesque body adds an element of the fantastic or the marvelous. Further, the body gives the grotesque the power to titillate, threaten, or to mingle with the reader's body in unexpected ways. In effect, Yaeger contends, pushing "us to explore the ways in which every body mingles dangerously with the world" (223).

In *The Member of the Wedding*, the grotesque appears in fascinating forms at the freak show pavilion. Frankie is frightened because she identifies with the freaks—while her young cousin, John Henry is not afraid; instead he harbors a sensitive and love-filled

affection for them, especially the Pin Head girl. At the sideshow, the freaks and the grotesque appear in full form to the audience:

The Giant was more than eight feet high,  
with huge loose hands and a hang-jaw face.

The Fat Lady sat in a chair, and the fat on her  
was like loose-powdered dough which she kept  
slapping and working with her hands...The

little Pin Head skipped and giggled and sassed  
around, with a shrunken head no larger than an orange,

which was shaved except for one lock tied with a pink bow. (*MW* 271-272)

Unafraid of the freaks, John Henry's declaration that the Pin Head "was the cutest little girl I ever saw," moves beyond mere acceptance into a deeper understanding, attraction, and empathy for others. John Henry's character garners delight from dressing in women's clothing; bringing out his own freakishness when he is described as looking like "a little old woman dwarf, wearing the pink hat with the plume, and the high-heel shoes" (*MW* 117). John Henry often appears both male and female, yet he is not ashamed of this, and in fact he embraces it—implying that *both* genders generate new and varied possibilities. He organizes his thoughts not around a determined, fixed identity, but rather in quirky opposition to all that is normal. Sadly, John Henry dies of meningitis in the end, not able to further develop his sweet, freakish, flexible self. Through his suffering and death, is McCullers' reinforcing that bodily difference is punished, or ultimately hidden and normalized? John Henry dies, while Frankie goes in the direction

of “normality,” assuming expected forms of femininity in her dress and behavior, instead of continuing to challenge the norm.

Further, in her book, Yaeger purports that the southern grotesque is subject to a wide range of historical variation. She also suggests that the grotesque bodies in southern women’s fiction must be read “along the axis of their daunting grotesques, their mingling of dirt and desire, their tragic invention of throwaway bodies” (115). Yaeger also maintains that these bodies serve political ends, for “when the margins of power start to shift, the body not only becomes prominent, it becomes a site for mapping social change” (127).

Similarly, McKay Jenkins, in his book *The South in Black and White: Race, Sex, and Literature in the 1940’s*, also discusses the intricate implications in McCullers’s writing that capture something beyond the political—as she is writing of the complexity of human identity. He notes that John Henry’s vision of a perfect world includes the notion that each person be half boy and half girl, while Frankie “planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, which ever way they felt like and wanted” (147). For these characters in McCullers’s work, an ideal world is “a place where identity, particularly racial and gender identity, is fluid, changeable, amorphous” (148). In Jenkins’ book, he writes of the complicated relationships of race and gender in the construction of southern identity, looking at individual and cultural identity. He also discusses McCullers’ use of the grotesque as a mode of expression: “Her novels are full of freak shows, carnivals, and prisons that the main characters find fascinating, familiar, and oddly comforting” (149). Also placing her within a new historicist context, Jenkins

notes that McCullers is an American existentialist, writing around the Second World War—a period marked by spiritual angst and loneliness.

Shifting to additional examples of recent critical thought raises the query: Have the freaks really gone away? Or have they become yet another slice of the Americana history pie that has vanished and become myth or fable? Or have the freaks merely taken on new manifestations, different shapes and forms that populate our everyday cultural imagination? Indeed, they are alive and thriving, according to the work of Mary Russo, Gary Richards, and Rachel Adams, as each author takes the stage with the freaks and grotesque. In Russo's book, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*, she attempts to relate the grotesque body within modern conditions and theories, including feminism and cultural studies. She looks at the interdependence of the grotesque and the normal and questions the politics of identity and place. She foregrounds that the grotesque body provides "room for chance" within "the very constrained spaces of normalization" (11).

A more recent example of a novel utilizing the freak and the grotesque is *Nights at the Circus* (1984) by Angela Carter, a text that also asks similar questions as McCullers, through the use of the grotesque, regarding gender and identity. In her article "The Spectacle of her Gluttony," Abigail Dennis explores Carter's use of the grotesque and her main character's refusal of the conventional paradigms of femininity. She analyzes this through Carter's overt performance of the main character's grotesque body. Thus, Fevvers [the main character] performs the grotesque body, while simultaneously performing (or mimicking) something closer to normalized femininity. In doing so, Dennis maintains, "she taunts the spectator with the tagline that adorns her advertising

posters: 'Is she fact or is she fiction?' This refers specifically to the mystery of Fevvers's putative wings; and it is these, as much as her palpable, pungent brand of sexuality, that draw crowds and fascinate men" (125). The performance of her grotesque body forms the nexus of her characterization. Rather than attempting to downplay her desires as social norms demand, Fevvers "consciously, even ostentatiously, performs them" (120).

Russo poses the interesting question of whether the female grotesque can model new kinds of relationships—if a society modeled on the classical body leaves irregular bodies behind, is there room for alternative relationships? This idea can be deployed in *The Member of the Wedding* and *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* as Frankie and Mick experiment with alternative ideas of femininity and relationships. Frankie, for one, upon learning that her brother is getting married, desires to join him and his bride as the third member of their marriage. She does not entertain this desire from a sexual standpoint; instead she reconciles it in her head as the logical solution to attain what she wants out of life. She would like to travel and live with them and believes that the success of their relationship will make them all famous. Frankie's desire to be not a "bride" but a "member" challenges the normative heterosexuality of marriage. While Mick decides that she does not want to be confined in marriage or in a relationship with a man, she instead entertains notions of setting out on her own—to become a composer and travel. She decides that she does not need anyone with her in order to accomplish her dreams in life.

This idea can be further explored following the aftermath of Mick's and Frankie's initial sexual encounters that leave them feeling empty and fragmented. McCullers' versions of sexual initiation are often associated with violence. Mick's first sexual

experience makes her feel as if “her head was broke off from her body and thrown away” (*THLH* 235). Similarly, Frankie is filled with rage at the thought of her initial sexual experience, and repeatedly refers to it as a “queer and unknown sin” (*MW* 289).

Likewise, Gary Richards is grounded in contemporary queer theory and from this stance he articulates critical discourse on sexuality in southern literature in his book *Lovers and Beloveds: Sexual Otherness in Southern Fiction, 1936-1961*. He makes distinctions between same-sex desire and homosexuality and again with what he calls gender transivity and sexual otherness. Richards questions the fixedness of identity in his first chapter, “Freaks with a Voice,” tracking the critical foundations of Southern literary discourse in order to establish its propensity to quarantine its freaks. Later on, in the chapter on Carson McCullers, he claims that she queers heterosexuality by assigning it deviancy; this is useful because she explores a space outside of the typical heterosexual binaries.

As Patricia Yaeger points out in *Dirt and Desire*, there are “these southern freaks and eccentrics—hybrid characters whose bodies and minds refuse to be average...refuse, or fail to comprehend, the norm—they reawaken the tipsy magic of carnival” (219). The work of Rachel Adams is particularly illuminating as she argues the importance of the freak in her book *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*. She recognizes that “freak is not an inherent quality but an identity realized through gesture, costume, and staging” (6). Although often treated as a form of amusement, freak shows performed important cultural work by allowing ordinary people to confront, and master, the most extreme and terrifying forms of otherness they could imagine (2). Freaks are a figure for the complex and shifting dynamic of identification, the problems of self and

other. Freak is also a performative identity that varies depending on the particularities of cultural and historical context (4). When Frankie enters the freak pavilion in *The Member of the Wedding*: “She was afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you!” (MW 272).

Adams suggests that instead of disidentification, in which the spectator recognizes her difference from the body on stage, the freak show becomes a space of identification. For example, Frankie projects her hidden fantasies and fears onto the freak and discovers them mirrored back in the freak’s gaze. Frankie and Mick both grow anxious as their height increases during puberty and both wonder if they continue to get taller and taller: will they become freaks? “The final horrors,” Fiedler writes in *Love and Death in the American Novel*, “as modern society has come to realize, are neither gods nor demons, but intimate aspects of our own minds” (38). Thus, the female adolescents are forced to question the stability and permanence of their growth and identity.

Frankie considers the current growth rate she is experiencing, noting that if it continues at this rate: “If she reached her height on her eighteenth birthday...she would grow to be over nine feet tall,” and she worries that, “a lady who is over nine feet tall...would be a Freak” (MW 206). Mick also experiences her height as a hindrance to social acceptance. Regarding her exponential growth, she remarks, in reference to her prom party: “Every kid at the party was a runt beside her. No boy wanted to prom with a girl so much taller than him.” Further, she queries, “maybe cigarettes would help stunt the rest of her growth” (THLH 101). McCullers’s fiction is populated by freaks, whether on the sideshow platform or set loose in the world; these freaks are estranged from their



own bodies and the society of others. Adams suggests that “the tensions between the deviant body and the imperative conformity of the dominant culture are granted visibility at the freak show” (90), an institution outmoded in many parts of the country, but still a thriving business in the small southern towns that are the setting for much of McCullers’s fiction.

The literary critic Leslie Fiedler, in disregard for the conventions of his own profession, called the literary tradition itself a sideshow, and likewise, he claims that the study of mass entertainment can provide access to underlying truths about American culture. In fact, real freak shows have risen again, especially in New York, a city infamous for having its proverbial “finger on the pulse” of contemporary culture. The resurrection of the sideshow can be examined in such groups as the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus and Circus Amok, both located in Brooklyn, and the Coney Island Side Show—as each attempts an authentic resurgence of an indigenous art form, albeit without the extreme element of exploitation that was insidious to the sideshow a century ago.

The Bindlestiffs assert: “In the mid 90’s the sideshow rose from its dusty place in our cultural attic, enhanced with rock and roll aggressiveness and marketing. Were we starting to search for something more visceral? Now, at the end of the millennium we see a rise in live shows again—theatre of all kinds” (Adams 218). The sideshow has effectively been revamped by artists bent on the politically radical, aiming to educate and incite, not exploit. These artists take the stage to challenge the same notions of gender and identity that have been outlined in McCullers’s fiction and her use of the sideshow—both successfully utilizing their medium to reach audiences of all ages. The body is again the location of transgression—displayed on the stage of the contemporary freak show.

In an article titled "Bakhtin and Popular Culture," Mikita Hoy quotes Bakhtin in reference to his view of a texts' longevity: "Texts continue to grow and develop even after the moment of their creation...they are capable of being creatively transformed in different eras, far distant from the day and hour of their original birth" (766). Viewing McCullers' fiction through a new historicist lens automatically incorporates a contemporary and popular culture lens as well, for as noted earlier, new historicism calls for "a modern reader's understanding and interpretation of the work." As time has passed, the rigid barrier between "high" culture and popular culture has begun to break down. For in the literary and art worlds, high culture and popular culture, in fact, have a great deal in common regarding human social practices. Popular culture, after all, is representative and is a terrain of political and social conflict. Popular culture refers to the beliefs and practices, and the objects through which they are organized, that are widely shared among a population (Mukerji 29). Popular culture has legitimacy due to the scale of its social impact.

Viewing the work of Carson McCullers through a contemporary lens is revealing for it shows how revolutionary some of her material was. McCullers portrays an undeniable interest in unconventional gender and sexual identities, her work producing commentary that can now be incorporated into modern discourse, for example, within the gender studies examined here. A reading of her fiction through a contemporary lens is significant, for her use of freaks, queers, and the grotesque is not in opposition to heterosexuality per se, but in defiance of all kinds of proscriptive social norms. Authors, such as McCullers, have created texts in which the act of reading becomes a political act,

shaping and using the power of language (Mukerji 45). Visual artists, as well, cover this terrain through the art that they produce.

In *Literary Women*, Ellen Moers observed a strong resemblance between the fiction of Carson McCullers and the photography of Diane Arbus. Moers noted that “Arbus’s photographs of freaks—her drag queens, lesbians, circus people, adolescents, lunatics, dwarfs, and the rest—look as if they might have been designed to illustrate McCullers’s fiction” (109). Rachel Adams explores the significance of Diane Arbus’s work in her article “Bringing out the Dead: Inside the Arbus Archive.” Adams considers Arbus “a documentarian of American culture” and maintains that her photographs “still have the capacity to inspire an unforgettable mixture of discomfort and admiration” (207). Adams claims that Arbus’s photographs make visible the underworlds and subcultures that have been central to revisionist histories of the 1950s and 1960s (208). Arbus began her career in the 1950s as a fashion photographer, but her interest in the aesthetic and social values of the fashion industry quickly waned. She shifted her focus and as one of the only women street photographers of her time she documented the lives of nudists, carnies, strippers, and local eccentrics, and shot portraits of some of the era’s most famous personalities.

Adams asserts, “From well-known events and people, to those forgotten on the margins of society, her subjects testify to the rapid transformations taking place in midcentury America” (208). Within one of Arbus’s series on nuclear families, among numerous prints and contact sheets, there are pictures of an affluent New York family, the Matthaeis’. Within this collection is a portrait of the eldest daughter, then eleven-year-old Marcella, “a stoic nymphet who poses stiffly in the center of the frame, her long

face a study in the tumultuous depths of early adolescent feeling” (212). Adams asserts that this portrait captures a moment “when American women like the feminists in Arbus’s photographs were recognizing the origins of gendered inequality in patterns of child rearing and family organization” (212). This image then “speaks volumes about the ambivalent consequences of affluence, preteen angst, and the constraints of femininity” (213). The ideas captured through this portrait also echo McCullers’s ideas regarding the struggle of gender and sexual identity in adolescence. Both artists speak to the constraints of social expectations and how they manifest in our lives. By incorporating a new historicist critical perspective, the work of Arbus stands as a testimony and vivid visual of the real-life street examples that represent the fictional characters found within McCullers’s work.

Arbus’s archive is as expansive as her influence and a great deal of her subject matter stunningly supplements and highlights the study of McCullers’s characters being conducted here. To further this point, in another series labeled “Catherine Bruce and Bruce Catherine,” Arbus begins the sequence with “Catherine Bruce” dressed as a woman. The series continues to show the subject in various states of undress during which she morphs from male to female, suggesting Arbus was preoccupied by the performative qualities of gender (219). Adams maintains that “the contact sheet drives this point home by illustrating the literal process of becoming” (219), echoing the ideas expressed here regarding Bakhtin’s writings on the grotesque, as well as McCullers’s use of intersecting gender and identity with the grotesque. Judith Goldman contends that “the mesmerizing power of Arbus’ photographs is also their problem. That power derives from her choice and, more importantly, from her handling of subject. Each picture acts

like a visual boomerang; freaks and lonely people scare us into looking first at them and then back at ourselves” (30).

This fusion of new historicism and popular culture continues, as we jump ahead nearly fifty years after the publication of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding* and twenty years after the tragic suicide of Diane Arbus. Now we can look at the work of an artist named Orlan, during the 1990s, enabling an examination of how she, in turn, challenges our current media-saturated, hyper-conformist, and consumerist society. In his book *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: Popular Conservatism and Postmodern Culture*, Lawrence Grossberg purports that the boundaries of the popular are fluid. Culture itself is never a fixed set of objects and the meaning of “the popular” as a qualifier is always shifting (77). The construction of the popular is always the site of an ongoing struggle.

Popular culture often inscribes its effects directly upon the body (79). These visceral responses, which sometimes seem beyond our conscious control, are a mark of the work of popular culture. At its best, popular culture seems to work at the intersection of the body and emotions. Orlan is a French artist and is an incredibly apt example to be employed here, as she undergoes and documents plastic surgery that transforms her face and body in relation to dominant and idealized images of women. In terms of popular culture, she is an immediate example of an artist challenging the same tensions of identity that McCullers did within her fiction.

One critic claimed that McCullers personified “the living construct of shifting sexual identities” (Greeley 172). If this is true, then Orlan is a current example of literally *shifting identities*. Linda Weintraub contends, in her article “Orlan: Self-

Sanctification,” that Orlan’s “goal is to transform herself so fundamentally that she legally warrants a new identity. This change is actual, and it is permanent. She works on her internal self through intense psychoanalysis, at the same time, she reconstructs her outer self through elective surgical operations” (77). In conjunction, these procedures form the crux of her art performance, for “she endures it as an artist who believes the body is merely a surface covering that can be shed or transformed as readily as a costume” (78). Orlan has undertaken a complete metamorphosis of herself and continues to incite and challenge those who view her art as she challenges the boundaries of identity itself. Her ideal goal is that her art is seen as a “performance inscribed within the social fabric, a performance which goes as far as the law...as far as a complete change of indemnity” (82). The underlying goal whether one agrees with her work or not, is that it alerts the audience to the fact that “everyone possesses the means of self-transformation. Her art both reflects and anticipates behaviors in society” (82).

Orlan maintains that: “My work and its ideas incarnated in my flesh pose questions about the status of the body in our society and its evolution in future generations via new technologies and upcoming genetic manipulations” (82). In an article entitled “Saint Orlan: Ritual as Violent Spectacle and Cultural Criticism,” Alyda Faber examines Orlan’s performances. She asserts that they “command attention because she puts her own body at risk in order to create awareness of the extent to which we all discipline our own bodies, in more or less painful ways, to conform to current social norms” (90). The artist’s use of cosmetic surgery as a medium for artistic expression amplifies the social pressures on women to conform to narrowly defined patriarchal standards of beauty (85).

Indeed, Orlan speaks to oppressive gender norms that continue to exist within modern society, often causing women confusion and disgust with their own bodies. Likewise, similar gender norms and expectations existed during McCullers's lifetime and are evident in her texts'. These issues morph and evolve over time, though, manifesting in new ways. Currently, we live in a society that glorifies youth and beauty, perpetuating unrealistic expectations in order for women to live up to these ideals. This obsession with body and appearance certainly shares similarities with McCullers' commentary on idealized femininity.

The freak and the grotesque have been examined here in McCullers's fiction, as she questions the limits and possibilities of the body, juxtaposing the figures of her adolescents with the figures of freaks. The freak and the grotesque have also been considered through the camera lens of Diane Arbus and "under the knife" in the extreme artistic vision of Orlan—each of these examples intermingles with the next, and overlaps in significant ways, as they each challenge the normative demands of identity which seeks to constrain us. In McCullers's fiction, and for each of these artists that serve as examples to illuminate her work, it is the location of the body in which transgression takes place, presenting us with unsettled identities and pushing the very boundaries of how we understand human beings.

When Mick and Frankie considered themselves freaks and queer, they had very limited avenues in which to explore their alternative selves, thereby conforming out of necessity. In modern times, though, it is not astounding to meet a young woman who wants to travel, or decides not to marry, or openly explores alternative relationships, yet the terms freak and queer live on, now manifest in other bodies and other ways.

Similarly, the grotesque may pose as a challenge to the idealized classical body and the normative social order it enforces. The freak's body is a literal incarnation of the grotesque. The freak—once so radically other, then became the symbol of the contradictions and strangeness within us all. Beneath the labels there is perpetually a return to understanding the body as a foundation for human identity. In the fiction of Carson McCullers, the freaks and the grotesque are often victims and outcasts, sadly marginalized, but they effectively disrupt the distinction between normal and abnormal.

As noted, Bakhtin's theory of the grotesque dwells on the body not in fixation but in its perpetual state of becoming, an image emblematic of the characters in McCullers's work. Although at the conclusion of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding* such promise of becoming seems all but extinguished by society's demand for "ideal womanhood," for the novels end without resolving these tensions of identity. Nonetheless, McCullers succeeds in raising the debate and asking questions that defy answers, both then and now. By engaging her work with contemporary accounts of gender and sexuality, the transgressive nature of McCullers' vision is revealed and is still willing to take the stage. McCullers teaches her readers that "all subject positions and all desires are haunted by intriguing oddities and strangeness; they are grotesque" (MW 267).



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