

**GROWING UP FEMALE IN THE DEEP SOUTH:
THE INITIATION OF MICK KELLY
IN CARSON MCCULLERS' *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER***

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In his pioneer study *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960) Leslie Fiedler referred to several contemporary women writers from the American South as “distaff Faulknerians” and accused them of feminizing Faulkner and dissipating his “grotesque tensions and masculine vigor.” The list of writers responsible for what Fiedler called the “delicate distillation of Faulknerianism” included Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, Katherine Anne Porter, Elizabeth Spencer and Flannery O’Connor, together with their heir Truman Capote.¹ Things have changed considerably in the thirty years since Fiedler’s indictment, and the numerous twentieth-century women writers from the South have been given ample credit for expressing the mind and the life of their peculiar region in a voice of their own and from unprecedented perspectives, for showing in new and original ways the complex rich inner life of women in the South, the life Faulkner could not possibly understand because he was a man. They explored the world of the South, and through it universal problems of the individual in ways unavailable to male writers. And in the worlds and the words of their stories they found a way of knowing the world and of living in it.

Carson McCullers was one of those daughters of a relentlessly patriarchal South who found their own voice and their own way of expressing their experience in a region that held to conservative male conceptions of culture more violently and for a longer time than other parts of the United States. Much of the power and uniqueness in her fiction comes from her experience as a woman in Southern society, and by her exploration of the identity and the life of women in the peculiar world of the South, she made a considerable contribution to American fiction.

Carson McCullers grew up in the stagnant backwaters of a small town in the Deep South and received the standard conservative education that the region offered. A year and a half after finishing high school she left the South to go to New York, that distant big city of her adolescent dreams, which would provide the artistic and intellectual stimulation that her independent spirit demanded. Like Joyce from Dublin and Katherine Mansfield from New Zealand, McCullers exiled herself from Columbus, Georgia, but her imagination remained tied to it and she would recreate it, together with

1.- Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 3rd ed. (1982; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 457-76.

her own adolescence, many times in her fiction. Years later, in one of her essays, McCullers would confirm her dependence, as a writer, on the places, the atmosphere, and the voices of her native region:

The locale of my books might always be Southern, and the South always my homeland. I love the voices of Negroes—like brown rivers. I feel that in the short trips when I do go to the South, in my own memory and in the newspaper articles, I still have my own reality.

Many authors find it hard to write about new environments that they did not know in childhood. The voices reheard from childhood have a truer pitch. And the foliage—the trees of childhood—are remembered more exactly . . . I hardly let characters speak unless they are Southern . . . No matter what the politics, the degree or non-degree of liberalism in a Southern writer, he is still bound to this peculiar regionalism of language and voices and foliage and memory.²

The most powerful and complex creations of McCullers were Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams, the largely autobiographical female adolescents of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) respectively. In Mick Kelly, the center of attention in this paper, we find the same desire for self-definition and the fierce struggle for individual ways of expression that characterized the young author who created her. McCullers was only twenty when she finished her first novel.

Although the deaf-mute John Singer is the most mysterious and best-known character in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the role of protagonist belongs to Mick Kelly. The mute is at the center of the novel only in the sense that the other characters become his satellites and unknowingly share a common attraction to and admiration for him, and the structure of the novel indicates that Mick is the character most fully presented and emphasized. Of the novel's twenty-five chapters, seven belong to Mick, six to Copeland and four each to Singer, Blount and Brannon. Five of the fifteen chapters of part two, the longest and most important, have Mick as protagonist and the dramatic changes she undergoes give the novel its direction. The best and most convincing dramatization of the novel's problems is conveyed through Mick Kelly.³

For a long time most critics of McCullers accounted for her special interest in adolescent characters by their suitability as means of presenting the theme of moral isolation, as the adolescent is peculiarly troubled by this intense awareness, and caught in a painful impasse, unable to return to the safety of childhood or to belong to the world of adults, which both attracts and terrifies him/her. The adolescent serves McCullers as

2.- Carson McCullers, "The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing," in *The Mortgaged Heart*, ed. Margarita G. Smith, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1975, p. 285. The essay was originally published in *Esquire*, 52 (Dec. 1959).

3.- In her outline for the novel McCullers wrote that "Mick is perhaps the most outstanding character in the book" and that "she commands more space and interest than anyone else" ("Author's Outline of *The Mute*," in *The Mortgaged Heart*, p. 139).

the microcosm of the adult world, and the adult characters in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* are very much like Mick: intolerably isolated, afraid, and confused. The permanent searching that characterizes the individual is more apparent in the adolescent, much more prone to rebel against the constrictions of the family and the environment in which he/she grows up and search for larger alternative worlds.

But making Mick and Frankie into symbols for abstractions does not help much in accounting for the richness of detail in their respective novels, and it ultimately eludes the discussion of the crucial question of gender, of how Mick and Frankie experience their growing up female in a particular society. It was not until fairly recently that these questions were confronted by feminist critics like Louise Westling, who observes that the problem confronted by Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams is the conflict between serious ambition and the pressure of conventional femininity, that "McCullers's portrayal of their dilemma is especially valuable because she concentrates on puberty, the time when demands for 'femininity' first press in upon a girl, and she allows her protagonists to be more sharply aware of their choices than Plath allows Esther Greenwood [in *The Bell Jar*] to be."⁴ The point is that the problems faced by Mick and Frankie would have been different had they not been lower middle class girls growing up in the provincial South of the late thirties and early forties respectively.

Through the eyes of Biff Brannon, we see Mick Kelly for the first time as "a girl of about twelve" on the threshold of the New York Café, which indicates her troubled state of transition between childhood and the adult world represented by the café into which she ventures from time to time. Brannon observes that "she was dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes —so that at first glance she was like a very young boy."⁵ With a boy's name and a "hoarse, boyish voice" (23), Mick has the same unfeminine ambitions and uncertain sexual identity that characterize Amelia Evans in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding*. All three resist being classified into the sexual roles assigned by tradition and imposed by society. And the story of Mick is, to a large degree, the story of her futile fight to escape the conventional standards of femininity her environment has in store for her. She smokes cigarettes like a boy and openly rejects her older sisters' obsessions with their looks and with movie stars. When they express their dislike for Mick's masculine clothes, she replies that "I don't want to be like either of you and I don't want to look like either of you. And I won't. That's why I wear shorts. I'd rather be a boy any day" (41). At school Mick takes mechanical shop, and not stenography, like her sisters had done; and she expresses her readiness to dress up like a boy to fight the Fascists.

4.- Louise Westling, *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor*, Athens: The Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1985, p. 114. Barbara A. White analyses the problems faced by the adolescent Frankie Addams because of her gender in *Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction* (Greenwood Press, 1985).

5.- Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961, p. 20. All page references within the text are to this edition.

McCullers described Mick's story as "that of the violent struggle of a gifted child to get what she needs from an unyielding environment."⁶ The victim of the economic straits of her family, Mick has to take care of her younger brother Bubber and the baby Ralph, but instead of staying home to baby-sit she takes them out and goes to explore the streets of the neighborhood. On one of these trips, which provide a physical outlet for her overflowing energies, Mick musters the courage to climb to the top of a house under construction and up there "she spread out her arms like wings. This was the place where everybody wanted to stand. The very top" (33-34). While at the top, Mick enjoys her solitude and lets her imagination run free, but her dreams about music and fame are soon interrupted by the crying of the baby that forces her to descend to a real world that has no room for her dreams and her unconventional cultural aspirations.

Forced to share a room with her despised older sisters, Mick envies her brother Bill, who "had the nicest room of anybody in the family . . . all to himself" (41). As the idealistic Mick cannot have a room of her own, she builds one in her imagination and divides her reality into two spheres:

With her it was like there was two places —the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. Mr Singer was in both rooms. Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room. The songs she thought about were there. And the symphony. When she was by herself in this inside room the music she had heard that night after the party would come back to her. This symphony grew slow like a big flower in her mind . . . The inside room was a very private place. She could be in the middle of a house full of people and still feel like she was locked up by herself (145-46).

The inside room is Mick's alternative to a real life of family and environment that fails to give meaning to her existence. It is that perfect orderly world of ideals where everything works out, the private garden where she has the necessary freedom to imagine, to design, and to produce artistic creations that express her distinctive personality and ambition. Feeling suffocated by the persistent heat of the South, Mick has the vivid conviction characteristic of childhood that life is elsewhere, and associates the fulfilment of her dreams with Northern or foreign places with abundant snow. The snowy far-away places in the inside room come to be the embodiment of the ideal world of perfection and purity which Mick projects as the alternative to the spiritual desert which threatens to trap her if she does not find a way out of the small Southern town. In this respect Mick constitutes a recreation of McCullers, who reminisced about her childhood in these terms: "I yearned for one particular thing: to get away from Columbus and to make my mark in the world. At first I wanted to be a concert pianist, and Mrs Tucker encouraged me in this."⁷

6.- "Outline," in *The Mortgaged Heart*, p. 139.

7.- The quotation is part of the unpublished manuscript "Illumination and Night Glare," in the McCullers collection at the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas at Austin.

In her inside room Mick plans to be world famous at seventeen. Her childish projects of inventing tiny radios and flying machines and making a large tunnel through the world constitute the alternative to the cultural deprivation and the static environment which surround her, as well as the unconscious expression of her poignant need for communication.

The main symbol through which Carson McCullers conveys the personality and the dilemmas of Mick Kelly is the music that haunts her inside room. The music she hears and composes in her mind promises Mick an avenue of approach to absolute beauty and freedom, an outlet for her creative energy, and the possibility to express emotions she cannot articulate. Through music Mick channels her determination to be unique, to build her individual identity. To enjoy and compose her music, Mick requires a not easily achieved privacy, and at night, when Bubber and Ralph are in bed and most of the normal world is asleep, she sneaks out of the house to listen to classical music coming from the radios of some houses in the neighborhood. The notebook with her unfinished compositions is a zealously guarded secret and Mick will not allow anybody to touch the piano she dreams of having some day. But music is also the connecting link with the external world, the opportunity for Mick to make her mark on the world, to be valued—she imagines the whole town listening to and admiring her symphony—and thus break out of her isolation.

One of the most expressive episodes in the novel is that in which Mick, hidden in the darkness of a sideyard, listens to Beethoven's third symphony being played on the radio (106-9). She associates the opening with God, with the most profound intimate layers of her being, as if "the outside of her was suddenly frozen and only that first part of the music was hot inside her heart." When the music gets "harder and loud," she identifies it with her own reality: "This was her, Mick Kelly, walking in the day-time and by herself at night . . . This music was her—the real plain her." The music, which alternates between suggestions of sadness and happiness, seems to contain an ungraspable totality: "The whole world was this music and she could not listen hard enough." The music "did not take a long time or a short time. It did not have anything to do with time going by at all." It is an ideal mythical world outside time, the forever elusive world of beauty and harmony to which Mick aspires.

When the music is over Mick has to wake from the world of dream to that of time and everyday reality, to leave the paradise of which she has had only glimpses:

The music left only this bad hurt in her, and a blankness. She could not remember any of the symphony, not even the last few notes. She tried to remember, but no sound at all came to her. Now that it was over there was only her heart like a rabbit and this terrible hurt (108).

As her environment provides her with no adequate outlet for the emotions aroused by the music, Mick turns all that energy upon herself in a typical masochistic response. She brutally hurts herself with a handful of rocks until she bleeds, as if she wanted to counteract the internal pain of her frustration by giving it some physical expression. This mutilation of her flesh is probably triggered by the painful recognition of herself as flesh without access to the high ideals suggested by the music.

The reality of music is paradoxical, since, while it promises to open up a world of ideal communication, it also precludes the possibility of self-expression, as suggested by the song titled "This Thing I Want, I Know Not What" which Mick never finishes composing. When Mick is working on her songs, "she couldn't write the music just like it sounded in her mind. She had to thin it down to only a few notes" (211). Thus music becomes an effective symbol of the gap between the ideal and the real, between feelings and their articulation. Mick will try time and again to reconstruct the Beethoven symphony, which is always "in the back of her mind," but she will never recover more than a fragment at a time. This is the same thing Mick does with Singer, her mind continually going over everything that happens when she is in the mute's room. Beethoven's symphony originates an association of Singer with God in Mick's mind, thus emphasizing the connections of the idealized deaf-mute with the perfect divine world of her aspirations. Ever since she first met him, the mysterious mute has suggested music to Mick, and talking to him is for her like exploring new musical territories. Early in the second part of the novel there is a passage that establishes the link between the snow, Singer, music and foreign places, all of them related in Mick's mind to that world of ideal communication and self-expression for which she yearns:

A lot of times the plans about the things that were going to happen to her were mixed up with ice and snow. Sometimes it was like she was out in Switzerland and all the mountains were covered with snow and she was skating on cold, greenish-coloured ice. Mister Singer would be skating with her. And maybe Carole Lombard or Arturo Toscanini who played on the radio (89).

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter is very much the story of Mick's gradual expulsion from her paradise, and her development from a dreamy romantic adolescent locked in the "inside room" to a young adult forced to live in the "outside room" sets the pattern to be followed by future adolescent creations of McCullers. As is the case with most heroes and heroines of modern literature, Mick's initiation does not take her from a routine world characterized by the protection of home and country into a heroic world of adventure but, rather, it deprives her of all her dreams as she is progressively assimilated by a materialistic short-sighted society.

Mick's initiation will have to take place in the narrow world of the small Southern town to which McCullers confines most of her characters. As Louise Westling observes, "for all three of McCullers's tomboy heroines, the landscape is a scene of freedom glimpsed but then denied by masculine forces which demand submission to the restricted sphere they have created for female sexuality."⁸ In the fictional world of McCullers most of the action takes place indoors, in rooms, kitchens, bars or cafés, and the only exploration permitted to female adolescents is that of the streets and sidewalks of their towns. In her essay on the theme of female initiation in American fiction, Elaine

8.- *Sacred Groves*, p. 179.

Ginsberg points out the range of settings in which the initiation takes place as one of the differences between stories of male and female initiation. She observes that "one does not find a female initiation story in American literature in which the crux of the initiation involves a young girl's developing an understanding of and a relationship with nature, a theme which is present, for example, in several stories by Faulkner and Hemingway. The natural world seems to be viewed as a masculine world in the American imagination."⁹ Western literature and culture have always accepted the escape from home of the prodigal son as a necessary direction. The prodigal son is considered a hero both when he leaves and when he returns. Joseph Campbell observes that "you can't have creativity unless you leave behind the bounded, the fixed, all the rules."¹⁰ So the son who leaves home in the biblical story follows the pattern of a culturally accepted heroic myth—for males only. By excluding women from heroism and adventure, the myth confines them to the home and the care of children and relatives. The journey away from home into creativity and freedom is rarely allowed to women.¹¹

The initiation of Mick into the adult world of realists begins with the failure of the party she gives at the beginning of part two, has its turning point in the episode of her first sexual union and its climax comes with her forced acceptance of a job at the dime store. Whereas in grammar school it was easy for Mick to find admittance into any group she wanted, in high school "everybody seemed to belong to some special bunch" and Mick "wasn't a member of any bunch" (95). Intending to overcome the loneliness that affects those who are leaving childhood behind and find belongingness, Mick gives a party for some of her new schoolmates.¹² That the party is for her an initiation ritual is indicated by the very long time she spends washing and dressing. Mick dresses up for the first time in her life and, with her sister's dress, for which she is too tall, the high-heel shoes that hurt her, the rhinestone tiara and the piles of lipstick and paint, she makes herself into a ridiculous caricature of a woman. The change is so dramatic that "she didn't feel like herself at all. She was somebody different from Mick Kelly entirely" (97).

The party, with much more nervous giggling than communication, becomes a fiasco with the irruption of the uninvited neighborhood children. It is then that Mick, feeling the disruption of being neither a child nor an adult, tries to retain the freedom of childhood by acting like "a wild kid playing out on Saturday night" (105). She jumps into a ditch down the street and, as the high-heel shoes make her slip, her stomach hits

9.- Elaine Ginsberg, "The Female Initiation Theme in American Fiction," *Studies in American Fiction*, 3 (Spring 1975), p. 36.

10.- Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, New York: Doubleday, 1988, p. 156.

11.- For the point about the prodigal son, I am indebted to Lucinda H. MacKethan, *Daughters of Time: Creating Woman's Voice in Southern Story*, Athens: The Univ. of Georgia Pr., 1990, pp. 38-39.

12.- In her desire to belong to some group, to be a member of something outside herself, Mick anticipates Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding*. The theme of belongingness, briefly suggested through Mick, would be thoroughly explored in the treatment of Frankie.

a pipe, and she loses her breath. Mick learns the hard lesson that, with the discarding of her shorts and tennis shoes, she lost the physical freedom of childhood, that in her adult clothes she will be more vulnerable and required to change some of her ways. Her dress torn and the tiara lost, a deeply humiliated Mick decides that "she was too big to wear shorts any more after this. No more after this night" (105). If wearing dresses makes McCullers' female characters so vulnerable and uncomfortable, it is no wonder that they resent so deeply the loss of their identification with the masculine.

The most devastating attack on the inside room comes when Mick meets the inevitable demands of sexuality. Elaine Ginsberg notes that "sexual experience seems to be the only recurring ritual which appears in female initiation stories" and that "it is most unlikely for a young girl to become initiated except through sexual experience."¹³ Male protagonists like Faulkner's Ike McAslin, Hemingway's Nick Adams, and Crane's Henry Fleming come to maturity in the masculine worlds of hunting, bullfighting and war, and their most significant relationships are relationships with other men. But for the young female protagonists there is no exclusively feminine world and, to become women, they have to come to terms with their relationship to men who are always more free and independent.

In her prom party Mick started a special relation with her neighbor Harry Minowitz, and in the spring we see her wavering between the music of her inside room and the biological demands of her rapidly changing body. Mick cannot concentrate to write her music when Harry is looking at her and she is made uneasy by the "warm boy smell about him" (219). Her sexual initiation occurs one Sunday in March when she and Harry go swimming in a creek in the woods a few miles from town. The idea of inevitability and entrapment is conveyed through the feelings of Mick before her ritual plunge into the cold waters previous to the crucial event: "She wasn't scared. She felt the same as if she had got caught at the top of a very high tree and there was nothing to do but just climb down the best way she could—a dead-calm feeling (239)."

The image of descent, which harks back to Mick climbing down from the top of the new house in her first chapter, is expressive of the inescapable fall of the modern heroine into the abyss of conventional womanhood.

The sexual union, suggested rather than described, is to Mick an experience of suffering and terror rather than pleasure. When Harry is inside her, she feels as if "her head was broke off from her body and thrown away," and looks "up straight into the blinding sun" (241) of the Southern desert that evaporates all her aspirations. When, on the way back to town, Mick digs a hole in the ground and buries a dead ant, we are not sure if she is expressing an unconscious desire to forget her unpleasant experience or merely confirming her conviction of the death and burial of her childhood and her artistic dreams. As the sun disappears behind the trees, Mick faces the fact that something in her has also gone down, that the suspension between childhood and adulthood is over: "She felt very old, and it was like something was heavy inside her. She was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be or not (243)."

13.- Elaine Ginsberg, p. 36.

Harry, either because he feels guilty or because he wants to avoid the consequences of Mick's possible pregnancy, goes the way of the prodigal and finds a job as a mechanic in Alabama. And Mick has to stay in the suffocating town to feel the guilt and the restlessness imposed by her new identity. Now she is an adult like her father, unable to be alone in the inside room and in permanent need of activity and company. The night, which used to give her a masculine freedom to explore the world and to listen to good music, now instills a sense of panic and oppression in her: "She knew the night a different way now. In bed she lay awake. A queer afraidness came to her. It was like the ceiling was slowly pressing down towards her face. How would it be if the house fell apart? (273)."

The inside room definitely crumbles when Mick is forced to leave school and take a full-time job at the dime store. Earlier in the novel, when Harry took a part-time job in Biff Brannon's café, Mick observed that "a boy can usually get some part-time job that don't take him out of school and leaves him time for other things. But the're not jobs like that for girls" (216). The last time we see Mick is in the New York Café, where she seeks some relief after another exhausting day at work. Mick, who as a child used to sneak in to buy candy and cigarettes, now sits alone at one of the tables, with her legs crossed and wearing stockings, bracelets and earrings like an adult woman. The obligations of a society moved by the dollar and not to the rhythm of Mick's music have completed her expulsion from the inside room, now unreachable both in terms of time and space: "And she wanted to stay in the inside room but she didn't know how. It was like the inside room was locked somewhere away from her (307)."

The biological and the monetary trap have combined to do away with the uniqueness and the creative aspirations of Mick, and to assimilate her into society. And her failure to express herself through music is more pathetic because it is not the consequence of a deficiency in Mick but of economic necessity.

Appropriately, it is Mick who finds the body of Singer, the god-figure for her and many others, who has committed suicide. The death of the false god coincides with and ratifies the death of the dreams Mick had projected on him. The fears that Mick used to express unconsciously through her paintings of accidents and catastrophes, and through her dream of being trampled by a multitude, have come true. In the face of all evidence to the contrary, Mick still tries to persuade herself that life has meaning and sense, but her dreams, now considerably reduced in scope —she substitutes the hope for "some good" for the uncompromising "too good," and would be happy with a second-hand piano—, sound futile to the reader. If Mick had been the boy she always wanted to be, at the end of her initiation she might have been another artist as a young man, equipped with the necessary baggage and experience to go into the world and conquer it. But she is a girl from a poor family, and to her womanhood brings, not a vast world to explore, but one that is restricted and sterile.

The destiny of Mick as a clerk in Woolworth's is McCullers' projection of her own future in the South if she had not escaped to New York, where she found everything that would have saved Mick Kelly: an environment congenial to her artistic talent and to her unconventional personality. But McCullers was never able to take her heroines away from the South or to allow them a successful outlet for their creative ambitions. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café* she created an adult heroine who asserts her feminine

independence and rejects the traditional roles assigned to women, but Miss Amelia pays for her defiance with her grotesqueness and with her ultimate destruction at the hands of two vindictive males. In spite of her successful escape from gender roles, Carson McCullers could not get rid of the deeply rooted fear that the independent female who defies gender conventions is trespassing on forbidden territory and becomes a freak.