

**THE INTOLERABLE BURDEN OF FEMININITY IN CARSON  
McCULLERS' *THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING*  
AND *THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFÉ***

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Carson McCullers' sexual ambivalence and her growing identification with masculinity are reflected in her fiction, in which she explored the identity of women in the conservative patriarchal American South. This paper analyses the futile attempt to escape from conventional femininity, which is perceived as a trap of impotence and submissiveness, in an adolescent and an adult character. Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding* is forced to renounce her ideal of universal love because of the imposition of a restrictive femininity. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, Amelia Evans pays for her rejection of traditional female roles with her grotesqueness and with her eventual destruction by two cruel vindictive males.

Carson McCullers limits her fiction to the level of the individual and the family, to personal crises and love relationships, to the restricted spaces she is familiar with: small towns in the Deep South, with their sidewalks, bars and stores; intimate spaces such as houses and kitchens. But this limitation, for some typical of women's fiction, is more apparent than real, since the wider issues of gender, race and class are manifested, especially in a traditional society like that of the South, precisely in the sphere of the family and the individual. And it is there that the writer, intent on exploring the life of concrete individual characters, can really perceive those issues.

In this paper I concentrate on a characteristic shared by two of the most complex and fully developed female characters of Carson McCullers: the attempt to escape femininity, to which they maintain either an attitude of ambivalence (Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding*) or of outright rejection (Miss Amelia in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*).

Both of them resist being classified into the gender roles assigned them by tradition. The attempt of McCullers' heroines to elude the burden of a femininity perceived as restrictive and enforced by a culture with no role models or sufficient outlets for creative women has a long tradition in women's literature. It is not uncommon for women writers and their female characters to sustain the dream of androgyny in order to preserve the freedom curtailed by the fixed boundaries of sexual definition. It is as if they clung to Lacan's belief in the dissolution of boundaries between male or female (Bowie 1991, 143), or to Freud's postulation of a universal bisexuality (Laplanche and Pontalis 1988, 52-54), which explains the conflict experienced by the subject when assuming his own sex. For female adolescent characters in particular it is often painful to part with the boyish freedom and the lack of sexual definition of childhood, and thus they tend to resent the weakening social role in which they are trapped because of their changing bodies which make them women. In one of her sonnets to George Sand, Elizabeth Browning suggests a longing for that life beyond death when earthly sexual differentiations would no longer apply and they could be boys together for all eternity (1913, 335). In many poems and letters Emily Dickinson, who as a child was as much of a tomboy as her mother allowed her to be, identifies with a male persona in order to imaginarily avoid "the deadly necessity of growing into a woman" in nineteenth-century Puritan New England (Patterson 1971, 339).<sup>1</sup> The reclusive poet of Amherst suffered an intense anxiety of gender and an excruciating ambivalence toward patriarchy. Virginia Woolf often dealt with the sense of loss and the internal division caused by the restrictions placed on creative women because of their gender. In her short story "Charlie", Kate Chopin dramatizes the ambivalent experience of the imaginative tomboyish heroine who is charming as a girl but will become an anomalous outcast if she carries her "unfeminine" ways into adult life. Like the tomboyish adolescent heroines of McCullers, Charlie gets to a point in her development where her cultural environ-

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<sup>1</sup>Patterson quotes the words used by Samuel Bowles, a friend of the Dickinsons', to congratulate another friend who had had a son: "I am glad it is a boy. Boys are institutions. They have a future, a positive future. Girls are swallowed up, —they are an appendage, — a necessary appendage, it may be, probably they are —but still they are appendages" (332). Patterson posits that a sensitive gifted girl like Emily, growing up in a society in which girls are looked upon as "appendages", would logically try to avoid destruction and retain the power associated with maleness by escaping into an imaginary male self.

ment imposes on her the wearing of dresses, a refinement of manners and the restraining of her aggressive "masculine" behavior (Chopin 1979, 181-213).

No doubt McCullers' own sexual ambivalence, coupled with her frequent identification with the "masculine", which she considered more real than the "feminine" in her own person, have a lot to do with the exploration of the problem of female identity in adolescent girls and with the dead end to which the rejection of the feminine leads in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. The summer when McCullers was working on this *novella* she confessed to Newton Arvin: that "I was born a man" (Carr 1975, 159).

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 and Frankie we find the same desire for self-definition and the fierce struggle for individual ways of expression that characterized the young author who created them. Mick and Frankie are both daughters of jewellers, like McCullers herself, and their environment and social class, as well as the anonymous fictional towns in which they live, are very similar to those felt as intensely restrictive by their creator in the late 1930s. For a long time, most critics of McCullers accounted for her female adolescents in rather abstract terms, considering them as adequate symbols of isolation and the confusion of transition. 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 in which the dominant culture is male. It was not until fairly recently that these questions were confronted by female critics like Louise Westling, who observes that the problem confronted by Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams is the virulent 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" (Westling 1985, 114). These adolescents find themselves at a crucial juncture in which they confront what Elaine Showalter terms "the split between male purpose and female passivity" (1977, 192). They are required to begin a process of submission to the manners and

modes of behavior stipulated for their sex, which makes it impossible for them to gain admittance into society without renouncing their creative aspirations.

In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* Mick Kelly has the same unfeminine ambitions and uncertain sexual identity that characterize Frankie Addams and Amelia Evans. And the story of Mick is, to a large degree, that of her futile fight to escape the conventional standards of femininity her environment has in store for her. The novel traces Mick's gradual expulsion from her paradise, and her development from a dreamy romantic adolescent to a young adult sets the pattern to be followed by future adolescent creations of McCullers. The biological and the monetary trap combine 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. If Mick had been the boy she had 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 Mick 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. If Mick had turned her back on her family responsibilities to pursue an artistic career, she would not have invited the same applause and approval as so many fictional male artists who, like Tom Wingfield in "The Glass Menagerie", Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, or George Willard in *Winesburg, Ohio*, desert their family and native place rather than sacrifice their destiny and artistic aspirations.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Member of the Wedding* the emphasis falls not so much on the failure of the creative aspirations of the female protagonist as on the trau-

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<sup>2</sup>Significantly several male critics have tended to side with Mick's family and cultural environment, saying that when giving up her ambition to become a composer, Mick does not fail as an artist but succeeds as a woman (Huf 107, 110). I find it difficult to agree with Linda Huf in her contention that Mick's trap, rather than capitalism or sexism, is love [for Harry?] and compassion [for her family]. As if sexism did not underlie the fact that self-sacrifice in love and dedication to the family is demanded more urgently from women than from men. Moreover, Huf's blaming Mick for her failure because she "doomed herself to a life of limitation" (120) does not agree with certain facts in the novel. For an extended discussion of Mick Kelly's problematic acceptance of femininity, see my essay "Growing up Female in the Deep South: The Initiation of Mick Kelly in Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*," soon to appear in *BELLS (Barcelona English Language and Literature Studies)*.

matic crisis resulting from the confrontation with the dangers of femininity. All the action in the novel originates in Frankie's desire to escape from her present situation. Her most urgent problem is the feeling of exclusion:

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. (7)

She is in the doorway, on the threshold separating her from the freedom of childhood, represented by her seven-year-old cousin John Henry, and the clearly defined sexual world of adults that she is reluctantly being forced to enter. An example of the latter is Frankie's recent expulsion from her father's bed, as she is a "great big long-legged twelve year old" (32). Being a girl excludes Frankie from a war that she romanticizes, and she is not even allowed to donate blood for soldiers to carry in their veins. The most prominent symbol of the constriction that makes Frankie's life an inferno is the Addams kitchen, where she spends most of her time in the company of Berenice and John Henry and where the novel opens and closes. The Addams kitchen is "square and grey and quiet" (8), "a sad and ugly room" (10). The world of the kitchen is too restricted for Frankie's dynamic heart, squeezed against the edge of the table. The only movement she is allowed is the circular, repetitive, and purposeless running around the kitchen table.

Frankie is at once terrified and secretly fascinated by the freaks at the fair and the inmates of the town prison, and on them she projects her deepest feelings. She has been growing so tall that she is afraid of becoming a freak one day, and this terror of freakishness is the terror of becoming an ugly girl, as the governing standards demand that women should be smaller than men and "cute." Thus Frankie inevitably associates looks with male approval and the "safety" of marriage, and she tells Berenice that she doubts "if they ever get married or go to a wedding... Those Freaks" (27). Unable to realize that the demands of society are not necessarily right, Frankie and Mick, thinking that it is they who are abnormal, are afraid of being marginalized for not fitting into the culturally imposed ideal. Both heroines have internalized the role a female is expected to play in their culture. And they are condemned to the anguish and internal division of ambiguous feelings towards a restrictive role which curtails their freedom and crushes their individuality, a role which frightens them lest they are unable to come up to its expectations.

In her analysis of the female adolescent, Simone de Beauvoir says that the young girl

does not accept the destiny assigned to her by nature and by society; and yet she does not repudiate it completely; she is too much divided against herself to join battle with the world; she limits herself to a flight from reality or a symbolic struggle against it. (1972, 375)

Totally dissatisfied with her unbearable environment and personal situation, Frankie needs illusions as much as the air she breathes, and finds a means of escape in the imaginary restructuring of reality. To the unsatisfactory real community of Berenice and John Henry, Frankie opposes an ideal one she builds in her imagination, and the imminent wedding of her brother Jarvis appears all of a sudden as the magic solution to all her problems. She invests the wedding, which for the realistic Berenice is just the chance for a pleasure trip, with a variety of meanings which transcend its material reality. Frankie derives from the wedding a new sense of identity and the key that will open the door of access to the world:

At last she knew just who she was and understood where she was going. She loved her brother and the bride and she was a member of the wedding. The three of them would go into the world and they would always be together. (57)

The change in Frankie becomes external as well and for her triumphant journey of exploration through town announcing her fantastic plans for the wedding, she puts on her "most grown and best" (61), the pink organdy dress, leaving aside the boyish attire that has distinguished her so far. She also puts on lipstick and wears perfume,<sup>3</sup> and in the after-

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<sup>3</sup>In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, when Mick Kelly dresses up and puts on lipstick for the first time in her life, the change is so dramatic that "she didn't feel like herself at all. She was somebody different from Mick Kelly entirely" (97). Both Mick and Frankie are prey to the insecurity that forces them to capitulate to the expectations of a society whose norm is that to be a "woman" a female has to change her natural appearance and wear the masks and costumes of feminine dress. Phyllis Racking observes that "as the term *gender roles* indicates, there is an important sense in which gender is a kind of act for all women", which explains why "among modern writers, the women, in contrast to the men, perceive the fundamental sexual self as a kind of costume rather than as the naked bedrock reality it seems to their male contemporaries" (113).

noon, for the first time, she encourages Berenice to talk about love. It is as if Frankie were beginning to feel the unconscious urge to conform to the ideal of womanhood imposed by her culture. As Frankie has no mother, and her father is absorbed by his job, the black servant is her major socializing force. With her five marriages, Berenice is the best representative of a society which does not allow women any other destiny apart from marriage. She relates Frankie's preoccupation with her brother's wedding to her concern with her role as a woman, and her advice is most traditional and "sensible":

Now you belong to change from being so rough and greedy and big... You ought to fix yourself up nice in your dresses. And speak sweetly and act sly. (98)<sup>4</sup>

An obvious indication of Frankie's desire to change from child to adult comes from the rejection of her "masculine" name in favor of F. Jasmine Addams, which has "feminine" romantic connotations and will allow her to form an ideal trio with Janice and Jarvis, whose names also begin with J A. But even the new name is indicative of Frankie's ambivalence, as she follows the largely male convention of using a first and a middle name, and on the visiting cards that she makes for herself she adds *Esq.* to her new name. The ambivalent Frankie wants to become a member of a wedding without the physical sexual union marriage entails, to become an adult without going through the process of restriction required to become a "woman" in her society.

Frankie's attitude toward sex is, in fact, characterized by ambivalence, confusion and escapism. Dimly aware that sexuality limits and entraps a girl, she prefers to avoid open discussion or acknowledgment of sexual facts. Thus she hysterically dismisses what the older girls say about married life as "nasty lies" (18), refuses to acknowledge the import of the sexual union of a married couple she involuntarily saw, and hates Barney McKean because the two of them "committed a queer sin, and how bad it was she did not know" (33).

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<sup>4</sup>Barbara A. White makes the following comment on the episode: "In three sentences Berenice has summarized the major traits girls are taught to cultivate in preparation for their relationship with men: "object" orientation ("fix yourself up nice"), passivity and submission ("speak sweetly"), and calculation and trickery ("act sly"). No real mother could do a more thorough job of socialization" (94).

It is precisely this self-protecting resistance and innocence with respect to adult sexuality that makes Frankie vulnerable when she wanders through town calling herself F. Jasmine and looking and acting older than she is. Paradoxically, her fantasy flight from reality catapults Frankie into an almost fatal encounter with it which, in turn, anticipates the fiasco at the wedding the following day. No longer a child looking in from the sidewalk, Frankie enters for the first time into the Blue Moon, a shabby café and hotel frequented by soldiers from a nearby camp. The sustained contrast between the sombre interior of the establishment and the light outside suggests that Frankie is giving up a world of certainties for one of moral and psychological obscurities. The inside of the Blue Moon is too stifling for Frankie and "the beery air reminded her of a room where a rat has died behind a wall" (85). When Frankie returns to the Blue Moon in the evening for a date with a soldier,

The change from the street to the inside of the Blue Moon was like the change that comes on leaving the open fairway and entering a booth. (157)

The image, which suggests the destiny of Frankie, bound to renounce the openness and the freedom of childhood for the sexual definition and restrictions of adult life, is expanded a bit later to convey Frankie's impotence and paralysis when invited to go up to the soldier's room:

It was like going into a fair booth, or fair ride, that once having entered you cannot leave until the exhibition or the ride is finished. (159)

The soldier, seen through Frankie's romantic eyes as a friendly traveller and a means of connection with the world, is only interested in getting Frankie into his bed. He is only after sex, whereas she wants a confidant for her dreams about the wedding. In her rash insecure attempt to look and act like a grown girl, Frankie has made herself a desirable sexual prey, as she unwittingly leads the soldier to treat her as a female stereotype. And she comes within a hairbreadth of being raped, which she avoids by beating the soldier unconscious with a glass pitcher. Barbara A. White observes that fear of and resistance to sex is very frequent in novels of female adolescence, the reason being that



for adolescent heroines sex implies domination by a man, and it is that loss of autonomy that they fear most strongly (1985, 103). Growing up in a cultural environment in which male sexual initiation is associated with the acquisition of power, whereas for a girl sexual intercourse entails a loss of individual choice, it is only logical that female adolescents like Mick and Frankie are reluctant to give up their “masculine” clothes and tomboyish ways.<sup>5</sup>

Frankie’s unwillingness to enter the restrictive world of womanhood is manifested not only through her oscillation between childhood and adulthood but also through her dreams of androgyny. When no longer allowed the freedom of the tomboy to transgress gender boundaries and display attitudes usually reserved for males, female protagonists frequently entertain the dream of androgyny. The androgyne, related to Neoplatonic, alchemical, and Biblical traditions, is an adequate image of perfection and transcendence, of going beyond the limits of the human condition in an imperfect fallen world, of the remedy for the consciousness of the lack, the gap which constitutes the subject. And in women’s fiction the sexual ambiguity of the androgyne acts as a symbolic means of going beyond the bounds imposed on feminine identity in an androcentric culture which places all power on the phallus, defines femininity in restrictive biological terms and ties feminine identity to passive sexuality and self-sacrificing maternity (Kahane 1980, 63; Racking 1989, 113-114). When Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry play at being creators, the protagonist plans her world “so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted” (116). But Berenice, who accepts things as they are and persistently denies Frankie’s fantastic dreams, insists “that the law of human sex was exactly right as it was and could in no way be improved” (116). And deep down Frankie knows that gender is only reversible in the realm of fantasy or of children’s play, as in the socially tolerated cross-dressing of John Henry, that her dream is impossible in a society in which androgyny is condemned as an aberrant anomaly and the Half-Man Half-Woman is one of the freaks at the fair. Of all the attractions, this is precisely

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Giddens observes that “‘loss of virginity’ for a boy, as from time immemorial, continues today to be a misnomer: for boys, first sexual experience is a plus, a gain... For girls, virginity is still something seen as given up... Boys expect to force the issue of sexual initiation, girls to ‘slow things down’” (51).

the one which most impresses Frankie and also the one she most fears, as it brings home to her the danger of not fitting in with the cultural ideal of the stereotyped restrictive roles.<sup>6</sup> As Louise Westling remarks, the hermaphroditic or androgynous references in the novel are placed in a negative frame, “for the novel’s entire movement is toward Frankie’s ultimate submission to the inexorable demand that she accept her sex as female” (1980, 345). At the end of the novel, Frankie visits the Fair twice but she avoids the Freak Pavilion, as the authority figure Mrs. Littlejohn says that “it was morbid to gaze at Freaks” (188).

The night after the failure of her fantastic plans for the wedding, the protagonist decides to run away from home and ends up again at the Blue Moon, totally drained and paralyzed. And once again we see the internal division in Frankie, who resorts to a long string of excuses to postpone her plan of escape. Frankie, who has that lack of initiative fostered by women’s education and is the product of a culture that makes it impossible for young women to be independent, is secretly aware that there is no world for her to go alone into. The initiation of Frankie will be completed behind the invisible bars of the small Southern town to which McCullers confines most of her characters. The only exploration permitted to McCullers’ 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 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:

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. (1975, 136)

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

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<sup>6</sup> Kahane says that the figure of the hermaphrodite in modern gothic literature “mirrors both the infantile wish to destroy distinction and limitation and be both sexes... and the fear of that wish when it is physiologically realized as freakishness” (60).

observes that “you can’t have creativity unless you leave behind the bounded, the fixed, all the rules” (1988, 156). 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 (McKethan 1990, 38-39). The journey away from home into creativity and freedom is rarely allowed to women, who are excluded from the ability to control the natural and social world and are expected to make do, instead, with connection and acceptance. In contrast, the male’s entrance into manhood is typically marked by violence and separation. Both Mick and Frankie live in a traditional society in which, for the vast majority of women, leaving home means getting married.

The protagonist of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* is an adult female who still retains a physical appearance and features of behavior far removed from those of conventional femininity. But this rejection of the “feminine” is only a short-lived dream eventually crushed by male violence. Miss Amelia’s “masculine” physical features make her a grown version of the tomboyish Mick and Frankie. She does not have the looks a “woman” is supposed to have, and the narrator describes her using the standards of the dominant culture:

She was a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead, and there was about her sunburned face a tense, haggard quality. She might have been a handsome woman if, even then, she was not slightly cross-eyed. There were those who would have courted her, but Miss Amelia cared nothing for the love of men and was a solitary person. (8-9).

Not only does Amelia’s physical appearance deviate from the patterns of femininity of her cultural environment, but also many of her psychic features conform to the traditional patterns of masculinity. She is the strongest personality in the rural community in which she dominates people and things. She is the richest person in the locality and in her country store she sells everything people and animals may need. Dressed in overalls and swamp boots, Amelia is outstanding in the carrying out of activities traditionally considered to belong to the male, in a community in which women are not allowed any prominent role. She

regulates the life of a locality of which she is, as if by an unstated agreement, guardian and protectress. Her weather predictions are widely credited, and when Amelia slaughters her pigs, everyone follows her example. Due to her strong character, her financial resources, and her social prominence, Amelia, rather than submit to society, enjoys the unusual privilege of making society adjust to her. Her strength and prominence depend on her "masculinity" in a world in which femininity is associated with weakness and passivity.

There is one facet of this Southern amazon, though, which contrasts with her "unnatural" physical size and the ruthless "unfeminine" aggressiveness of her dealings with the town. More popular than the local doctor, Amelia applies her own secret remedies to cure the sick with an enviable success, and with a special tenderness when they are children. And by doing it for free, Amelia partly compensates the community for what she takes from it through litigations and commercial transactions. But when consulted about complaints related to the female sex, a shamed and perplexed Amelia is incapable of suggesting any cure. This seems to indicate, not so much an unconscious aversion to anything which reminds her of her repressed female sexuality, but rather a tragic inability to identify with a femaleness from which she has been physically and psychically excluded. Amelia's identification with the masculine is as absolute as her ignorance of female sexuality. Left motherless at birth, she was raised by her solitary father who, for some reason, had always called her "Little". Probably tied to a possessive father, Amelia was left incapacitated for a normal personal and sexual development. Without a female role model to identify with, Amelia could only imitate her father's frenetic activity and commercial abilities. In spite of her unconventional physique and her identification with male power, Amelia is expected to act like a woman and the result is, as A. Carlton remarks, "one of the most poignant figures in all of American literature, and a parable of the distortions created when one culture [male] so completely dominates another [female]" (60).

The artistic form chosen for this *novella*, told in the mode of the folk tale, allows McCullers to stress the excessive aggressiveness and the evil qualities of Marvin Macy, the character who represents "normal" masculinity. The man who "had chopped off the tails of squirrels in the pinewoods just to please his fancy", and carries about with him "the

dried and salted ear of a man he had killed in a razor fight", took advantage of his good looks and impressive physical strength to degrade and shame the "many females in this region" (35) who fell for him. This is a community which deep down cannot tolerate the anomaly of a woman who exerts the power normally associated with men, and Macy's unexpected falling for Amelia is deemed as the welcome opportunity for her to become "feminized" by subjection to male power:

[The town] counted on the marriage to tone down Miss Amelia's temper, to put a bit of bride-fat on her, and to change her at last into a calculable woman. (38).

This town's concept of gender roles is so restrictive that if a man ever shows feelings of fear or anxiety, or weeps, he is known as a Morris Finestein. This was a hypersensitive little Jew who wept when called a Christ-killer, and lived in this town before an easily imaginable "calamity" (14) made him move to a nearby locality.

As she is incapable of playing a role that implies weakness or submission, Amelia violently rejects Macy when he tries to possess her on their wedding night. The man Amelia can safely love is the dwarfish hunchback Lymon, as he does not pose any threat of domination or sexual possession. With Lymon Amelia can safely release her compassion and affection, and she can love him without fear of awakening sexual demands. The possibility of sexual union is out of the question, in view of their respective physical configurations: Amelia is remarkably tall whereas Lymon is hunchbacked, his chest sticks out and does not reach above Amelia's waist. Her love for Lymon causes a partial "feminization" in Amelia, who on Sundays discards her overalls in favor of a red dress. She becomes more human in her transactions, and her country store is transformed into a café where the community members find an unprecedented feeling of fellowship. After Macy's return from prison, "she put aside her overalls and wore always the red dress" (64), in a desperate effort to attract Lymon away from the former. But the more "feminized" Amelia becomes, the more vulnerable and exposed she is to male vengeance.

The apex of the novel's plot comes with the titanic fight between Amelia and Macy. She fights out of love for Lymon and hate for the man who dared to try to possess her sexually and who now is turning Lymon

away from her. Macy is moved by the hate into which his violently rejected love has turned, by the wish to avenge Amelia's refusal to surrender to him. And it seems that for the author the outcome of the fight will tell whether a woman can negate her femininity or even exert physical domination over men (Westling 1985, 125). But Amelia is not defeated directly by masculine potency, or by a social environment which has never subjugated her, but rather by Lymon's deceit, betrayal and perfidy, weapons which traditional male discourse has often attributed to the female. As she has never consented to the demands of a society which would have preferred a "normal" relationship of submission to male dominance, Amelia is the cruel victim of the love which she herself, or perhaps destiny, chose. Invited by Amelia into her house six years ago, Lymon was her salvation for some time, until he decided to side with the real "man" and turned into a destructive agent. He never felt for Amelia what she felt for him, and the fact that he never invested as much as her in the relationship gave him a decisive advantage. If she had not released her love and compassion, that is, if she had not submitted to what the dominant culture marks as "feminine", she would not have made herself vulnerable. Amelia's personality may have lacked completion before she fell in love with Macy, but she possessed, at least, the "male" power she had derived from her upbringing. In the end, she has neither, and is left alone, alienated from both the masculine and the female world. Amelia undergoes a significant physical transformation as "the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy" (82-83). No longer an anomalous figure with a woman's name and a masculine physique and behavior, she at last fits a role (the old maid) that the town can safely relate to, and her confinement inside her decaying house reflects her condition of prisoner and victim of restricted gender roles. This double imprisonment of Amelia marks the definitive collapse of the dream of androgyny, of transcending the limitations of female identity, of the powerful independence of the mannish woman.

In the mannish Amelia who transgresses gender roles and threatens to subvert the laws of nature and society, McCullers carried the tomboyish aspirations of Mick and Frankie much further, but she finally had to relinquish them and face a tragic dead end. The author never took her heroines away from the South nor did she allow them a successful outlet

for their creative ambitions. She projected on Mick and Frankie what would have been her own future in the South if she had not escaped to New York, the cosmopolitan city which provided the environment congenial to her artistic talent and to her unconventional personality. Miss Amelia asserts her feminine independence and rejects traditional female roles, but she pays for her defiance with her grotesqueness and her eventual destruction at the hands of two cruel vindictive males. It seems that in spite of her own successful escape from gender roles, Carson McCullers could not get free from the deeply rooted fear that the independent female who resists gender conventions is trespassing on forbidden territory and may even become a freak.

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