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Adolescent Transformation In the Short Stories of Carson McCullers

Ashley-Ann Dorn Woods
University of New Orleans

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Adolescent Transformation In
the Short Stories of Carson McCullers

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

by

Ashley-Ann Woods

B.A. College of Charleston, 2007

May 2010

For my darling Munch, my “Honey, Honey”...
and for Jonathan, no one else I would walk through hell for...

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
I. Introduction	1
II. Psychoanalytical models of Adolescence.....	3
III. “Sucker: Hero Worship”	6
IV. “Like That: Peter Pan Syndrome”	14
V. “The Haunted Boy: Language”	20
Conclusion	26
Bibliography	27
Vita.....	30

Abstract

Carson McCullers's neglected short stories "Sucker," "Like That," and "The Haunted Boy" depict stark adolescent crises. Her character analyses dramatize important elements of many theories of adolescent psychology. Each of these stories depicts what happens when something goes horribly wrong in the course of an already difficult stage of life.

In "Sucker" two different stages of adolescent development collide. Pete and Sucker go through different psychological adjustments. The two boys discover the difficulties of adolescent romance, hero-worship, peer group formation and exclusion, and power reversal. The narrator in "Like That" struggles with her Peter-Pan complex as she witnesses her sister go through an adolescent romance. She despises—and fears--the changes that adolescence and adulthood bring to her life and her family. "The Haunted Boy" explores the struggles of Hugh as he deals with issues of adult imitation, lack of a strong male role model, peer loyalty, and emotional repression.

Key Words: Carson McCullers, short stories, adolescence, Erik Erickson, adolescent romance, hero worship, peer-group, imitation, identity crisis.

I

Carson McCullers is best known for her Southern gothic novels and short stories. She created a wide array of adolescent and pre-adolescent characters who encounter difficult and sometimes violent circumstances that force them to grow up before they are ready to do so. McCullers creates distinct boundaries between the world of the adolescent and the world of the adult. I will apply several theories of adolescence and adolescent development in an examination of these boundaries in her stories “Like That,” “Sucker,” and “The Haunted Boy.”

Critics in recent decades have neglected both McCullers’s stories and their themes of adolescence. McCullers worked in many genres: plays, novels, novellas, poetry and short stories. When the stories were first published, reviewers and scholars, according to Virginia Spencer Carr, “praised her mastery” of the form (Carr 127). Although her longer works and plays have received much critical attention, her short stories have in the course of time been written off by more recent critics as mediocre at best or as sketches for characters appearing later in her longer works. For example, the young cousin in “Sucker” is often seen as a precursor to Bubber Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and the drunk in the bar in “A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud” bears many resemblances to Jake Blount. Even Robert Phillips’s insightful 1978 essay “Freaking Out: The Short Stories of Carson McCullers” is primarily concerned with how the short stories lead to the larger works, and it focuses on spiritual isolation and the image of the freak. Other works, such as Judith James’s *Wunderkind: The Reputation of Carson McCullers* and Sarah Gleeson-White’s *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*, include only brief summaries of the short stories and their relevance to the works of McCullers as a feminist, and neither systematically addresses McCullers’s treatment of adolescence.

Adolescence comes from the Latin verb *adolescere*, which means “to grow up or to grow into maturity” (Muuss 4). Psychologically, according to Ralph Muuss, adolescence is “a marginal situation in which new adjustments have to be made, namely those that distinguish child behavior from adult behavior in a given society” (Muuss 4). Muuss argues that

In most cultures two different criteria have been applied to determine the end of adolescence. They are: (1) functional definitions – such as ability to support oneself – and (2) status definitions- such as having reached the age necessary to vote or having been given status through initiation or puberty rituals. . . . Status definitions are easily determined and more obvious, but often less meaningful, since they depend on arbitrary convention and often neglect individual differences in psychological development. Functional definitions are more related to the responsibilities that are required of adults to function effectively in a given society and relate to self, mate, offspring, and society. (Muuss 9)

Status definitions in America today would be the ability to vote at eighteen and the ability to drink at twenty-one. It would be easy to argue that once a person reaches one of these markers he/she is officially an adult. In America at the age of eighteen a person is legally an adult, but at what age is a person functionally an adult? Functional definitions are the markers throughout adolescence that are being created and formed and are what adolescents are preparing for in their adult lives. Functional definitions cannot be determined by a number or an age. Physical development is a large part of adolescence and will figure in several of McCullers’s stories about adolescents, including “Sucker” and “The Haunted Boy.”

II

Every psychoanalytic model specifically defines adolescent behaviors. Franz Boas states that “When we speak about the difficulties of childhood and adolescent life, we are thinking of them as unavoidable periods of adjustment through which everyone has to pass. The whole psycho-analytic approach is largely based on this supposition” (quot. in Groves 343).

Freud’s views of adolescence are more sexual in nature and revolve around “psychosexual development” (Muuss 38). Freud’s Oedipal complex appears during the adolescent years and plays a large part in the actions of males and how they relate to their fathers and father figures. Freud describes adolescence as the period of “total or at least partial latency that the psychic forces develop which later act as inhibitions on the sexual life, and narrow its direction like dams. These psychic forces are loathing, shame, and moral and esthetic ideation masses” (quot. in Groves 343). Freud asserts as well that while education partly constructs these “dams . . . this development is organically determined and can occasionally be produced without the help of education” (Groves 343).

Erik Erickson characterizes adolescence as

the period in which the individual must establish a *sense of personal identity* and avoid the dangers of *role diffusion and identity confusion*. This implies that the individual must assess what his liabilities and assets are and how he wants to use them. He must answer for himself the questions of where he came from, who he is, and what he will become. Identity, or a sense of sameness and continuity, must be searched for. Identity is not given to the individual by society, nor does it appear as a maturational phenomenon, like pubic hair; it must be acquired through sustained individual efforts. (quot. in Muuss 63)

According to Erickson, one of the ways that the adolescent tries to discover his own identity is through imitation or modeling: “Children at different stages of their development identify with those part aspects of people by which they themselves are most immediately affected, whether in reality or fantasy. Their identifications with parents, for example, center in certain overvalued and ill-understood body parts, capacities, and role appearances” (*Identity* 158). Children, according to Erickson, begin to try to find their place in society by imitating the behaviors of the adults in their lives. As a child these behaviors are just observed, but the adolescent has to engage adults and is faced with the problem of how to do so. Imitating the behaviors that he/she has witnessed serves as a good example, except when the adolescent oversteps her boundaries. There is a hierarchy of roles present in society that must be learned from childhood. As a child this hierarchy is present in the nuclear family structure (from younger siblings to older grandparents) that the adolescent has to find her place among (*Identity* 159). Once outside the home the adolescent must struggle to find her place in the world of adults. This transition spawns an identity crisis.

The term “identity crisis” was first used for a specific clinical purpose during World War II, but according to Erickson it now means “a central disturbance in severely conflicted young people whose sense of confusion is due . . . to a war within themselves, and [is found] in confused rebels and destructive delinquents who war on their society” (*Identity* 16-17). The struggle to find oneself and one’s place in the world becomes internalized. Muuss explains:

The identity crisis of adolescence revives and grows out of an unresolved autonomy crisis. Since autonomy is an essential ingredient for the development of identity during adolescence, the battle for autonomy in decision making is a familiar issue in the adolescent’s struggle for independence from his family. The

adolescent may become so self-conscious and lacking in autonomy that he is afraid of being seen in an exposed or vulnerable situation. He may question the reliability of the whole experience of childhood and therefore be unable to find an identity. On the other hand, entering adolescence with too much autonomy may cause shameless defiance of parents, teachers, and other authorities. (60)

The identity crisis serves to find the balance of autonomy that the adolescent needs. If the adolescent has too little autonomy she is timid and introverted. Too much autonomy will create an adolescent who is rebellious and defiant. Sometimes both cases can be found in one adolescent.

The need for group acceptance is a driving factor for adolescents. According to Muuss, the adolescent in school and in play “has been taught to evaluate his behavior against that of his age-mates” (Muuss 111). Peer scrutiny is an important part of life in Western culture. It is only natural that the adolescent “now discards his parents’ value system and exchanges it for the standards of his peers” (Muuss 111). A group mentality gives adolescents the feeling that they are not alone in their confusion and identity crisis. Adolescents rallying around a single goal or mutual interest form cliques that provide emotional bonding.

Another example of bonds that adolescents try to create is in the emotional and romantic relationships they forge. Psychologist Eduard Spranger, quoted in Muuss, describes the nature of love in the world of the adolescent:

He [Eduard Spranger] makes an important distinction between “sexuality” and “pure love.” Sexuality refers to the conscious sensual body pleasures that result in sexual excitement and desire. “Pure love” refers to the spiritual form of love without a desire for physical contact and stimulation; it is basically aesthetic, not

sensual. Pure love is a psychological function depending upon understanding, empathy, and sympathy. Sexuality and pure love originate in different layers of the psychological structure. In a genuine love relationship of mature adults, sexuality and pure love merge into affectional sexuality. But they develop separately and independently during adolescence. It is in this division of sexual development into aesthetics that results in many adolescents problems. (Muuss 88)

Adolescents are unable to understand “pure love” and “sexuality” as one emotion. The two emotions are so exclusive as to be confusing, as when “a boy directs his pure love toward one girl and his sexuality towards another” (Muuss 88). The adolescent desires lasting relationships but doesn’t possess the tools to make them last.

Together these psychoanalytic theories describe a confused adolescent who struggles to discover her identity as she assimilates into the adult world. She models herself after the adults she sees around her, and she wrestles with a divided libido. She yearns to bond with peer groups, and she is incapable of having an adult relationship while at the same time fighting the desire to do just that. All these conflicts can be found in the adolescents of McCullers’s short stories.

III

In McCullers’s short story “Sucker” two young characters in the story struggle with some of the adolescent problems Erickson describes. McCullers, who wrote the story when she was only seventeen, considered it to be “her first important story” (quot. in Madden 139-140). The narrator, Pete, is sixteen and the older of the two boys by about three years. The story’s action

covers several months in an extended flashback. Pete is looking back on his relationship with his cousin Sucker, who has lived with him since he was a baby after his parents were killed in a car accident and has been there so long that “half the time I used to forget that Sucker [wasn’t] my brother” (McCullers 1). The two boys share a room and also a bed, but “It was always like I had a room to myself. Sucker slept in my bed with me but didn’t interfere with anything” (McCullers 1). But when Pete falls for a girl named Maybelle at school Pete and Sucker’s relationship changes. When Pete and Maybelle get along, Pete treats Sucker well and confides in him. But when Maybelle starts abusing Pete’s affections, Pete does the same with Sucker until Pete verbally lashes out at Sucker one night and alienates Sucker for good.

Pete struggles with trying to initiate a mature love relationship, which is almost impossible during adolescence. Erikson says that “to a considerable extent adolescent love is an attempt to arrive at a definition of one’s identity by projecting one’s diffused self-image on another and by seeing it thus reflected and gradually clarified. This is why so much of young love is conversation” (*Identity* 132). Adolescent lovers are looking for themselves in their partners; and they are looking for self-affirmation. Pete’s experience is no exception. He apparently learns nothing about Maybelle (or nothing is told to the readers) but much about himself. Pete finds that towards the end of his relationship he is the only one involved, and perhaps the only one who ever was. He has showered Maybelle with gifts and tokens while never asking to receive anything in return but her affections. Pete comes to realize that Sucker has done the same thing--given Pete everything he has ever asked of him, asking only to be loved in return.

Sucker's hero-worship of Pete is characteristic of a young adolescent. Many times in the story Pete describes Sucker's adoration. For example: "Sucker thought anything I did was always swell" (McCullers 1). And Pete uses this hero-worship to his advantage:

Whenever I would bring any of my friends back to my room all I had to do was just glance once at Sucker and he would get up from whatever he was busy with and maybe half smile at me, and leave without saying a word. He never brought kids back there. . . . he always knew without me telling him that I didn't want kids that age meddling with my things. (McCullers 1)

Sucker sees this exchange as a bond. With his half smile he goes about his solitary fun elsewhere, while Pete takes little notice of him and even less notice of the fact that he has banned Sucker from having any friends his own age in his own room. Pete is thus responsible for most of Sucker's isolation from kids his own age. Sucker's hero-worship even explains how Sucker got his nickname:

Sucker used to always remember and believe every word I said. That's how he got his nick-name. Once a couple years ago I told him that if he'd jump off our garage with an umbrella it would act as a parachute and he wouldn't fall hard. He did it and busted his knee. That's just one instance. And the funny thing was that no matter how many times he got fooled he would still believe me. Not that he was dumb in other ways – it was just the way he acted with me. He would look at everything I did and quietly take it in. (McCullers 1)

This gullibility is common in young adolescents, who crave peer approval and a place in a peer group. Pete is fully aware of his power, but he continues to tease Sucker. This is a difference between a young adolescent and an older adolescent. Sucker is unaware of his hero-worship and

the vulnerability it creates. Pete, on the other hand, is fully aware of the situation and uses it for his own selfish reasons: a laugh or self-assurance. But as adolescents age, they become more aware of the desire to preserve their own integrity, which is not possible with hero-worship. Sucker sacrifices all of his integrity in his desire to be close to Pete and to please him no matter the cost.

Pete in turn worships Maybelle. No matter how badly Maybelle treats Pete, he is blind to her indifference towards him. Pete's relationship with Sucker mirrors his relationship with Maybelle: "I guess I wanted to ignore somebody like Maybelle did me. You could always tell by Sucker's face when his feelings were hurt. I don't remember all the ugly remarks I must have made because even when I was saying them my mind was on Maybelle" (McCullers 3). Sucker is so insignificant to Pete that Pete doesn't even remember what he has said to Sucker, but looking back, Pete recalls Sucker's face and sees his treatment of Sucker as reflective of his treatment by Maybelle. Gerald Pearson's theory of adolescence bears on the boys' dynamic:

Hero worship is a part of adolescence in all cultures and in all countries. The search for ego ideals . . . is simply part of growing up, and occurs in the development of every individual; being a natural phenomenon, it cannot be changed. (Pearson 72)

Sucker struggles to connect with Pete throughout the story. He is lonely, the kind of kid who doesn't have many friends. So as a young adolescent he still uses his imagination:

He [Sucker] used to talk to himself a lot when he'd think he was alone – all about him fighting gangsters and being on ranches and that sort of kids' stuff. He'd get in the bathroom and stay as long as an hour and sometimes his voice would go up high and excited and you could hear him all over the house (McCullers 2).

Sucker is still enough of a child to indulge in fantasies, wild ones about ranches or cowboys, to escape his loneliness and become a hero. This passage also shows that Sucker hasn't reached puberty, because his voice is still high and shrill. Pete and Sucker do connect when things are going well for Pete and Maybelle and Pete opens up to Sucker. Pete says, "Sucker hung on to my back. He felt little and warm and I could feel his warm breathing on my shoulder" (McCullers 4). Pete uses Sucker as an outlet to indulge his own selfish means, but there is a real connection, and this is the one moment in the story when Pete seems to notice his own need for Sucker. Pete finds a solace in his ability to open up to someone about his relationship with Maybelle.

The comfort doesn't last long, nor does Pete's relationship with Maybelle. When Pete and Maybelle separate, Pete's attitude changes, and the confrontation he has with Sucker changes the young cousin. Pete justifies his treatment of Sucker by mirroring it with his relationship with Maybelle. "I guess I wanted to ignore somebody like Maybelle did me. You could always tell by Sucker's face when his feelings were hurt. I don't remember all the ugly remarks I must have made because even when I was saying them my mind was on Maybelle" (McCullers 3). Pete is transferring Maybelle's behavior. This is an example of a negative form of identification or imitation which adolescent psychologists Albert Bandura and R.H. Walters define as "the occurrence of matching responses" (quot. in Muuss 236). Pete tries to hurt Sucker the way that Maybelle has hurt him, so he acts the way that she has acted towards him to elicit a similar response from Sucker. However, Pete can't anticipate the changes that he causes in Sucker:

Now that Sucker has changed so much it is a little hard to remember him as he used to be. I never imagined anything would suddenly happen that would make us both very different. I never knew that in order to get what has happened straight in

my mind I would want to think back on him as he used to be and compare and try to get things settled. If I could have seen ahead maybe I would have acted different. (McCullers 2)

Pete regrets his actions and longs for the Sucker he knew before all this occurred and also for himself before he met Maybelle. He has a sense that their shared adolescence has warped them.

There are two palpable changes in Sucker after Pete falls for Maybelle. The first, which occurs while Sucker and Pete are in a good place in their relationship, is the shift from childhood into adolescence. It comes with growth and identification with other individuals:

His face seemed different now. He used to look timid and sort of like he was afraid of a whack over the head. That expression was gone. His face, with those wide-open eyes and his ears sticking out and his mouth never quit shut, has the look of a person who is surprised and expecting something swell.” (McCullers 5)

Sucker has lost his timidity and is facing the world now not as a scared child but as an adolescent with a sense of wonder. This is easier to do when he has a friend by his side, as Sucker believes he has in Pete. Sucker sees Pete as a part of his peer group, and this gives him a sense of comfort.

As Maybelle and Pete drift apart so do Pete and Sucker. The younger boy’s second transformation begins. Pete says that Sucker “was growing fast and for some reason began to stutter when he talked. Sometimes he had nightmares or would throw up his breakfast” (McCullers 7). Sucker has lost his peer bond with Pete and is suffering an identity crisis that is manifesting itself in nervous afflictions.

Pete’s behavior is a little less rational as he starts to act in irrational ways, especially when Maybelle is around. He says, “a devil would get into me and I’d hold my face stiff and call grown men by their last names without the Mister and say rough things. In the night I would

wonder what made me do all this until I was too tired for sleep” (McCullers 6). Pete is venting his frustration, and in Erickson’s words, “frustration leads to aggression” (*Childhood and Society* 418). Pete’s frustration with Maybelle inevitably leads to the deterioration of his relationship with Sucker and his transference of all his emotions onto Sucker. He describes the release as involuntary: “There was something in me and I couldn’t help myself. I don’t think anybody ever gets that mad but once. Words came without me knowing what they would be. It was only afterwards that I could remember each thing I said and see it all in a clear way” (McCullers 7). Only looking back does Pete see the damage he has done:

Afterwards I could remember the change in Sucker’s face. Slowly that blank look went away and he closed his mouth. His eyes got narrow and his fists shut. There had never been such a look on him before. It was like every second he was getting older. There was a hard look to his eyes you don’t see usually in a kid. A drop of sweat rolled down his chin and he didn’t notice. He just sat there with those eyes on me and he didn’t speak and his face was hard and didn’t move. (McCullers 8)

In the wake of Pete’s tirade Sucker completes his change into an adolescent, suffering an identity crisis and beginning to struggle through life on his own.

Sucker undergoes several changes after the fight, both emotional and physical. The physical changes are the ones that are easier to see:

Sucker has grown faster than any boy I ever saw. He’s almost as tall as I am and his bones have gotten heavier and bigger. He won’t wear any of my old clothes any more and has bought his first pair of long pants- with some leather suspenders to hold them up. Those are just the changes that are easy to see and put into words. (McCullers 9)

Sucker has gotten as tall as Pete, which can be seen as a challenge in a way. Pete feels uncomfortable with this new Sucker and how he “sprawls across the bed in those long corduroy pants with the suspenders and just stares at me with that hard, half-sneering look” (McCullers 9). Pete doesn’t even call him Sucker anymore but calls him by his given name. “We never speak except when we have to before the family. I don’t even want to call him Sucker anymore and unless I forget I call him by his real name, Richard” (McCullers 9).

The emotional changes are a little more difficult to understand in both Sucker and Pete. Sucker’s social behavior has changed and he has found a new clique, whereas before he was happy to spend time alone or with Pete. According to Muuss,

Since an identity can be found only through interaction with other people, the adolescent goes through a period of compulsive peer group conformity as a means of testing roles to see whether and how they fit him. The peer group, the clique, and the gang do help the individual in finding his own identity in a social context, since they provide the individual with both a role model and direct feedback about himself. (Muuss 64)

Often adolescents can go to the other extreme and become total outsiders, rejecting their peers. While different, the joiner and the isolate share similar motivations: to be true to oneself or to a cause. The isolate feels that no one else will ever understand his motivation, while the joiner finds a group and a cause or similarity and becomes truly devoted (*Identity* 254). Sucker, who is a joiner, has “gotten up this gang of kids and they have a club. When they aren’t digging trenches in some vacant lot and fighting they are always in my room” (McCullers 9). The tables have turned on Pete. Whereas before Sucker was the one who gave Pete his privacy, Pete is the one giving Sucker the room now since, as Pete says, “our room isn’t mine at all any more”

(McCullers 9). The power has switched hands, and Sucker is now the one in control. The reason behind this power reversal lies in Pete's guilt for his treatment of Sucker-- and also in his fear of Sucker. Pete says,

More than anything I want to be easy in my mind again. And I miss the way Sucker and I were for a while in a funny, sad way that before this I never would have believed. But everything is so different that there seems to be nothing I can do to get it right. I've sometimes thought if we could have it out in a big fight that would help. But I can't fight him because he's four years younger. And another thing – sometimes this look in his eyes makes me almost believe that if Sucker could he would kill me. (McCullers 10)

Pete's relinquishing of power to Sucker is a turning point in the story. Pete never repairs the damage he inflicts on Sucker, if it is even possible to do so: "Sucker was gone when I woke up the next day. And later when I wanted to apologize as I had planned to he looked at me in this new hard way so that I couldn't say a word" (McCullers 9). Sucker does not give Pete the opportunity to regain power, and this intransigence is part of Pete's struggle. He wants to set things right with Sucker, but he cannot even talk with him. Also, Sucker frightens Pete. Pete says he can't fight Sucker because he's younger than himself, but he's really afraid of the new look in Sucker's eyes that he himself put there.

IV

Although Pete's adolescent relationship with Maybelle is a sub-plot in "Sucker," "Like That" focuses on grim adolescent romance. The narrator, a nameless thirteen-year-old girl,

relates the story of her sister Sis's relationship with a boy named Tuck. This relationship, even though Sis is eighteen, is in many ways an adolescent relationship and one that takes its toll on Sis emotionally and physically because she is unprepared to deal with the two different aspects of a relationship, which Spranger defines as sexuality and pure love.

Sis acts and dresses like a girl much younger than eighteen. The narrator says that when Tuck started coming around she would have to tell Sis "she shouldn't wear ankle socks because they might go down town or she ought to pluck her eyebrows above her nose like the other girls do" (McCullers 48). Sis is a simple girl who enjoys reading, seems to have a strong bond with her brother and younger sister, and treats the narrator like an equal:

The three of us could have more fun by ourselves than any family I know. That's the way it always was before this. Not that Sis was playing down to me, either... We would lie and talk sometimes for a good while. I'd like to hear about the places she and Tuck had been or to laugh over different things. Lots of times before that night she had talked to me privately about Tuck just like I was her age – asking me if I thought she should have said this or that when he called and giving me a hug, maybe, after. (McCullers 48- 49)

Sis's relationship with Tuck destroys this intimacy – and her bond with her own family.

Sis's relationship with Tuck quickly and permanently changes her. Sis and Tuck have an argument, which the narrator vaguely overhears: "the door of the car didn't open but I could hear them talking. Him, that is. His voice was low and I couldn't catch any words but it was like he was explaining something over and over again. I never heard Sis say a word" (McCullers 50-51). And when Sis finally gets out and enters the house she encounters their mother. The narrator says that her sister's "voice was funny – sort of like a piano in the gym at school, high and sharp

on your ear. Funny” (McCullers 51). By the time she gets to the girls’ room Sis is crying, and all she will tell the narrator is that she and Tuck had “a fuss” (McCullers 51).

The two girls share a bed, and, the narrator says:

She [Sis] was as far over the edge of the bed as she could get, her legs stretched out stiff and her hands holding tight to the edge and her face on one arm. She used always to sleep all sprawled over on my side so I’d have to push at her when it was hot and sometimes turn on the light and draw the line down the middle and show her how she really was on my side. I wouldn’t have to draw any line that night, I was thinking. (McCullers 52)

Sis has changed from a girl who enjoyed and took comfort in her family into an adolescent who is unable to take comfort in the family because her focus is now her boyfriend. When the narrator touches her, Sis “jumped like I’d pinched her” (McCullers 52). Sis is so tortured by her adolescent relationship that physical contact that once was comforting now is unbearable.

This unhealthy adolescent relationship has started to take a physical toll on Sis. She becomes nervous and anxious. “Her face was white as the pillow and there were circles under her eyes. There was a muscle jumping on one side of her jaw like she was chewing. She hadn’t combed her hair and it flopped over the pillow” (McCullers 52-53). Sis is starting to look sick, and she no sense of harmony. Spranger states that “the adolescent has not yet obtained internal harmony and unity” (quot. in Muuss 90).

The narrator never discovers the truth behind Sis’s unhappiness. In one scene Sis and Tuck arrive at the house while the family is outside drinking iced tea on the front porch one Sunday afternoon. Tuck and Sis are uneasy, both with each other and in the presence of the family:

Tuck sat on the swing with Sis and he didn't lean back and his heels didn't rest on the floor – as though he was all ready to get up again. He kept changing the glass from one hand to the other and starting new conversations. He and Sis didn't look at each other except on the sly, and then it wasn't at all like they were crazy about each other. It was a funny look. Almost like they were afraid of something. Tuck left soon. (McCullers 55)

Later, when Sis's father asks about Tuck's going away to college, Sis runs into the house. The narrator wants to ask her sister what is wrong, but she is too afraid:

Was hers and Tuck's fuss so bad as that or was it that she was so crazy about him that she was sad because he was leaving? For a minute I didn't think it was either of those things. I wanted to know but I was too scared to ask. I just sat there with the grown people. I never have been so lonesome as I was that night. (McCullers 56)

The questions remain unanswered. Is it because the narrator never asks or would she have even gotten the answers had she asked the questions? Sis's alienation leaves the narrator alone with adults, and she is denied the peer companionship of her sister. She remains an adolescent, but Sis has begun her transformation into an adult.

Four months later Sis has changed drastically:

Sis is thinner and sometimes to me she looks in the face like a grown person. Or, like, in a way, something has suddenly hurt her hard. We don't do any of the things we used to. It's good weather for fudge or for doing so many things. But no she just sits around or goes for long walks in the chilly late afternoon by herself.

Sometimes she'll smile in a way that really gripes – like I was such a kid and all.

Sometimes I want to cry or to hit her. (McCullers 56)

Sis suffers a drastic change in emotion and behavior. Pearson says of adolescent love that “this phenomenon of falling in love marks quite a change in the orientation of the adolescent. The desire to get more than one gives begins to change to its opposite. The open narcissism of the child, with its strong self-love and self-admiration, begins to change to love and overadmiration of the object, with consequent self-depreciation” (Pearson 119). Sis has shifted all the love and emotion she previously devoted to herself and her family onto Tuck. Now she is left with nothing for herself. Since Tuck is not around, she seems to be literally wasting away.

The narrator's observations about the older adolescents around her suggest that the loss of her sister has left her vulnerable to Peter-Pan syndrome. Sylvia Farnham-Diggory characterizes this syndrome as a “mistrust of others, grasp of immediate pleasure, retreat from time, refusal to consider entry in the world of adult plans and responsibilities, refusal to ‘grow up,’ or to die” (Farnham-Diggory 56). The narrator grows to desire everlasting childhood and an escape from the tumult of adolescence and adulthood as she witnesses the painful effects of growing up by watching Sis, and, earlier, her older brother Dan. Throughout the story her constant refrain is that she won't be “like that.” She says:

I don't want to be any older if I'd get like Sis has. But I wouldn't. I wouldn't like any boy in the world as much as she does Tuck. I'd never let any boy or any thing make me act like she does. I'm not going to waste my time and try to make Sis be like she used to be. I get lonesome – sure- but I don't care. I know there's no way I can make myself stay thirteen all my life but I know I'd never let anything really change me at all – no matter what it is. (McCullers 56)

Although the narrator acknowledges that she cannot possibly stay thirteen forever, she believes she can remain impervious to sexual vulnerability. She sees Sis's relationship as her downfall and believes that the best way to avoid being "like that," like Sis, is to avoid loving someone the way Sis loves Tuck. In doing so the narrator ostracizes herself:

I skate and ride my bike and go to the school football games every Friday. But when one afternoon the kids all got quiet in the gym basement and then started telling certain things- about being married and all – I got up quick so I wouldn't hear and went up and played basketball. And when some of the kids said they were going to start wearing lipstick and stockings I said I wouldn't for a hundred dollars. You see I'd never be like Sis is now. I wouldn't. anybody could know that if they knew me. I just wouldn't, that's all. I don't' want to grow up- if it's like that. (McCullers 56-57)

The narrator goes to the opposite extreme of femininity to try to avoid relationships and what she sees as her sister's downfall. She refuses to act in a girly manner that might attract boys, such as wearing lipstick or stockings, even though in the beginning of the story she was the one giving Sis advice on how to dress for Tuck. The tables have turned, and she desires a total asexual existence to avoid romantic encounters that might change her.

The irony here is that the narrator has let something change her. Since she was giving Sis tips on how to dress and taking an interest in Sis's love life, there is some indication that the narrator is prepared to begin her love life. But Sis's experience has changed her, and she is unaware of the irony of her situation. She is so bent on not being changed that she has, in turn, changed herself.

V

Hugh, the teenaged protagonist of “The Haunted Boy,” struggles to find a different kind of love. Hugh is not a child or an adult. He is battling to move from the world of childhood into the adult world, by bypassing adolescence. The ending of the story shows that Hugh has not succeeded.

“The Haunted Boy” tells the story of Hugh, who comes home one afternoon after school with his friend John to a seemingly empty house. For most adolescents this wouldn’t be alarming, but for Hugh this scenario sets off warning bells. His mother is supposed to be waiting for him, as she always is, but there is no note and no indication of where she went. He fears that this may be like “the other time” (McCullers 160). Hugh is thinking of the time a little over a year earlier when his mother, who had thought she was pregnant, was discovered to have a tumor. Hugh stumbled upon the scene of her attempted suicide: “His mother lay on the floor and there was blood everywhere. . . . on her slashed wrist, and a pool of blood had trickled to the bathtub and lay dammed there” (McCullers 166). When the story opens, she has returned from the Georgia state hospital in Milledgeville.

In “The Haunted Boy” the central characters attempt to move from adolescence into adulthood by imitating adults and by forming a peer group. The boys call each other by their last names, Brown (Hugh) and Laney (John), because Hugh says “it seemed sporty and grown and somehow grand” (McCullers 159). This is also an example of the boys acting in the so called “peer group” described by Muuss, and John’s behavior seems to have a strong influence on Hugh’s mannerisms and diction. The boys are still only adolescents--Hugh a freshman in high school and John two years older. Hugh likes John “better than any other boy at school. . . . compared to him the other boys seemed like a silly crowd of punks” (McCullers 159). Hugh

seeks John's companionship because he is mature, unlike the other boys at school. John has never teased him about his mother—or even, until the events of the story unfold—asked him about her. By contrast the other boys at school like to torment Hugh about his mother's insanity. Hugh badly needs John's peer friendship. Hugh has been dealing with his memories and his mother's illness alone, and he finds in John someone that he believes can understand him. Because he feels alone and deserted by his mother and estranged from his father, Hugh seeks a strong bond with John.

The boys also use pretentious diction to make themselves feel older and to try to imitate adults. John, for instance, says: "Does this establishment have anything pertaining to a cow? A white, fluid liquid. In French they call it *lait*. Here we call it plain old milk" (McCullers 160). Talking about obligation the way an adult would, but with no true sense of the word, John is selling raffle tickets for the Glee Club, a silly form of obligation, and he says "to be obligated is to be obligated" (McCullers 165). John is a bright kid, "the best student in the sophomore class, brainy, but not the least bit a teacher's pet" (McCullers 159), and he uses a few words from several different languages, much to the awe of Hugh. "You know so many foreign words and languages" (McCullers 163), Hugh tells John, and when Hugh finally uses a foreign word of his own he feels "witty and pleased with himself" (McCullers 163). The boys associate the use of grand words and knowledge with the adult world, and being able to manipulate these things gives them a sense of power and brief pleasure.

John's ultimate violation of the bond occurs when he cites his obligation to the glee club and leaves Hugh alone in his haunted house. Hugh feels that there are other obligations at hand as well, and his eyes are "wild with terror" when his friend disappears (McCullers 165).

Hugh in “The Haunted Boy,” like the narrator in “Like That,” associates being childish and adolescent with tears, and for Hugh not crying proves that you are an adult. Hugh asks John, “Do you ever cry . . . I don’t” (McCullers 163). John admits, “I do sometimes” (McCullers 163). Hugh has not cried once throughout the entire ordeal with his mother--not during her depression, not after her suicide attempt, not even during her time at Milledgeville. Hugh views tears as a childish vice, and he lists all the hard times when he had not cried (McCullers 162). The most important things in the list that Hugh gives are the times when Hugh’s father cried and he did not. Hugh seems to use his father as a gauge of adult behavior, and when Hugh is in better control of his emotions than his father, Hugh sees that as a sign of adulthood. What Hugh fails to realize is that simply not crying does not make him an adult. In trying to act grown-up he has been bottling up his emotions instead of dealing with them. When he cries, it is “from relief and a strained, bleak tiredness that had lasted so long. The sobs jerked his whole body and quieted his jazz, fast heart” (McCullers 166). Hugh’s heart is mentioned before in the story ,as he was climbing the stairs: “His heart was not like a basketball but like a fast, jazz drum, beating faster and faster as he climbed the stairs” (McCullers 165). The tears are the emotional release that Hugh needs to deal with his haunting memories and his mother’s yearlong absence. In crying Hugh quiets his racing heart and finds relief.

The father-son interactions in the story are reversed in many ways. The father seems to need more reassurance than his son, and he tries to find it in Hugh, whose descriptions of his father are not altogether flattering:

He had not cried when he called his father. He had not cried those few days when they were deciding what to do. He hadn’t even cried when the doctor suggested Milledgeville, or when he and his father took her to the hospital in the car –

although his father cried on the way home. He had not cried at the meals they made – steak every night for a whole month so that they felt steak was running out of their eyes, their ears; then they had switched to hot dogs, and ate them until hot dogs ran out of their ears, their eyes. They got in ruts of food and were messy about the kitchen, so that it was never nice except the Saturday the cleaning woman came He had not cried when his father drank too much so that it took his appetite and Hugh had to eat alone. (McCullers 166-167)

Hugh's father, while dealing with a difficult situation, behaves like an adolescent who has been left unattended. He doesn't know quite what to do with his freedom or how to act. He is gluttonous, slovenly and self-indulgent. He doesn't seem to consider Hugh, not what Hugh wants for dinner or what a growing boy might need to eat for meals besides meat. He certainly doesn't think about Hugh when he drinks himself into oblivion so that Hugh has to eat by himself. In the beginning of the story, when Hugh is beginning to panic, he says he "needed John, he needed someone; most of all he needed to hear his mother's voice" (McCullers 159). It is no coincidence that every character in the story is mentioned in these lines but Hugh's father. Hugh's father has never been any source of comfort to him and in a time of strife would not be the person he would turn to. Hugh finds out how to survive in the adult world on his own through a series of trials, in a process described by Gerald Pearson:

A child needs the opportunity to find out by trial and error methods what he has enough knowledge and judgment to be responsible for, and what he has not. Adolescents often want to take responsibility in matters where their knowledge and judgment are insufficient; and just as often they want to avoid taking responsibility for things they are quite competent to handle. (Pearson 149)

Because Hugh's father is not an appropriate source of guidance and is unprepared to deal with the situations at hand, Hugh must use the knowledge that he has amassed in his short life and come to terms with his predicament. This is a difficult position for him, and Hugh deals with his problems by repressing all his emotions and not talking to anyone.

The communication between Hugh and his father is confusing and awkward. Hugh derives no comfort from their communications, and while his mother is gone the two do not bond but remain isolated and alone: "He had talked with no one about his mother, except his father, and even those intimacies had been rare, oblique" (McCullers 161).

Unlike the endings of most other McCullers stories, the ending of "The Haunted Boy" resolves the narrative's tensions. Robert Phillips calls the ending "pat" (quot. Clark 174). This ending does seem comparatively hopeful, but when closely examined it might not be as hopeful as it seems.

Hugh believes that he is now in the realm of adulthood, moving there through the process of confronting his fears and accepting his emotions. Hugh's father recognizes his transformation and bonds with Hugh in the back yard, treating him like a man. His father tells him, "I just want you to know that I realize how fine you were all that bad time. How fine, how damn fine" (McCullers 170). Hugh's father not only acknowledges Hugh's adult behavior but compliments him using a swear word, something that becomes a bonding experience for the two--an example of what Hugh sees as a functional initiation into the world of the adult. "His father was using a swear word as if he were talking to a grown man. His father was not a person to hand out compliments – always he was strict with report cards and tools left around. His father never praised him or used grown words or anything" (McCullers 170).

Hugh's father is one of the few examples of positive paternal influence in McCullers's fiction. Virginia Spencer Carr states that Hugh's father is the only one who "partially redeems him. Whereas he had distanced himself from his son during his wife's crisis, he now praises Hugh for his courage in accepting the experience and treats him like a grown-up for the first time (152). His father's approval and Hugh's new place in the adult world seem to give Hugh a new sense of peace, replacing the nagging guilt and turmoil caused by his mother's mental illness.

There is also a sense of hope in the unknown at the close of the story: "Although he felt he would never cry again--or at least not until he was sixteen--in the brightness of his tears glistened the safe, lighted kitchen, now that he was no longer a haunted boy, now that he was glad somehow, and not afraid" (McCullers 170). Hugh, while now emerging in the adult world, still possesses the qualities of a youth. He vows never to cry again, or at least not until he reaches the ripe old age of sixteen. This desire illustrates the adolescent mechanism of time displacement. Two or three years seem like an eternity to Hugh, an almost "never." Also, Hugh's grandiose optimism suggests that his is a false hope. Hugh claims that he is no longer a "haunted boy" because he has mastered his fears, but has he? Hugh is standing alone and isolated in the backyard. No matter how far he feels he has come, he is still completely alone. His father's attempt to bond with him has passed, and he is again left in the yard to figure things out on his own, as he has been doing throughout the entire story.

"The Haunted Boy" leaves the reader with more questions than answers--but certainly with a sense of dread about Hugh's future. There is no question Hugh will have to make his way in the world alone. He has been abandoned by everyone in the story: his mother, father and even John. Hugh is left alone in the isolation of late adolescence.

Conclusion

Carson McCullers's neglected short stories "Sucker," "Like That," and "The Haunted Boy" depict stark adolescent crises. Her character analyses dramatize important elements of many theories of adolescent psychology, and serve as a strong warning of adolescence and what can possibly happen when things go wrong in development.

In "Sucker" two different stages of adolescent development collide. Pete and Sucker go through different psychological adjustments, and Sucker endures many physical changes as he fully enters the world of adolescence. The two boys discover the difficulties of adolescent romance, hero-worship, peer group formation and exclusion, and power reversal. By the end of the story, Sucker has assumed a new identity, a new name, and a new role in the adolescent world.

The narrator in "Like That" struggles with her Peter-Pan complex as she witnesses her sister go through adolescence and enter adulthood grappling with an adolescent romance. She despises—and fears--the changes that adolescence and adulthood bring to her life and her family. Ironically, her neurotic avoidance of all adult emotions and responsibilities creates a new kind of alienation and isolation in her life.

"The Haunted Boy" explores the struggles of Hugh as he deals with issues of adult imitation, lack of a strong male role model, peer loyalty, and emotional repression. Hugh goes through all his trials on his own, and throughout the story he is deserted by every other character. Hugh represents the lonely and mapless struggle of every adolescent.

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Vita

Ashley-Ann Dorn Woods was born in Charleston, SC. She received her B.A. in English with a concentration in creative writing from the College of Charleston in 2007. Ashley-Ann has studied under poets Paul Allen and Carol Ann Davis and fiction writers Anthony Varallo and Brett Lott. She worked for three years on *Crazyhorse* literary magazine as an intern. She married her husband Jonathan, in 2004, and has a daughter, Lexia.