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MODERN GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN THE NOVELS  
OF CARSON MCCULLERS

THESIS

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## CHAPTER I

### THE MODERN GOTHIC GENRE

The word Gothic was originally a "race term"<sup>1</sup> referring to the Teutonic nations of Goths.<sup>2</sup> The barbaric, superstitious nature of the Gothic people gave the term its connotation of ignorance, cruelty, mystery, and savagery, a flavor which persisted until well into the eighteenth century, when Gothic and medieval, terms which had become synonymous, began to acquire more favorable semantic associations.<sup>3</sup> An awakening of popular interest in the supernatural and in the "poetry and chivalry of the Middle Ages"<sup>4</sup> occurred along with a "shift of emphasis in literature from 'decorum' to 'imagination' . . . ."<sup>5</sup> Romantic wildness and strange, mysterious beauty had become associated in the public mind with medieval and with Gothic, and had begun to appeal to the popular taste.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Edward Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the English Novel, 2d ed. (New York, 1954), p. 111.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 112.

<sup>3</sup>Devendra P. Varma, The Gothic Flame (New York, 1966), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

The eighteenth-century fascination with the Middle Ages was shared by Horace Walpole, who first used Gothic as a critical term when he called his novel The Castle of Otranto (1764) "a Gothic story."<sup>7</sup> The immediate literary successors of Walpole, such as William Beckford, William Godwin, Matthew Gregory Lewis, and Charles Robert Maturin,<sup>8</sup> placed special emphasis on grotesque characters and on supernatural events in their stories<sup>9</sup> with the result that Gothic eventually connoted "grotesque, ghastly, violent, and superhuman."<sup>10</sup> Ghosts, ghouls, sinister hero-villains, pursued maidens, and foreboding castles became trademarks of these Gothic tales and created the atmosphere of terror and of dread which pervaded the early writings.<sup>11</sup>

Terror, dread, and grotesque characters have begun to abound again in the works of American writers of the mid-twentieth century such as Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, James Purdy, William Faulkner, Truman Capote, and others.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, their works have been labeled modern

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 131.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Wagenknecht, Cavalcade of the English Novel, p. 112.

<sup>11</sup> Varma, Gothic Flame, p. 17.

<sup>12</sup> Harry T. Moore, "Preface," New American Gothic, Crosscurrents Modern Critiques (Carbondale, 1962), p. vii.

Gothic.<sup>13</sup> In this modern Gothic genre, medieval settings have been abandoned for the cities and towns of twentieth-century America. The "horror for its own sake"<sup>14</sup> of Maturin and Lewis has been abandoned for a horror or terror with an instructional purpose.<sup>15</sup> The modern Gothic writer endeavors to produce for his readers a vision of what Tennessee Williams describes as "the underlying dreadfulness in modern experience."<sup>16</sup>

Williams' "underlying dreadfulness" is created in the modern Gothic genre by the loneliness of modern man, by his inability to find love and communication. Indeed, spiritual isolation is the theme of the modern Gothic novel. Characters often attempt to escape the pain of their isolation through flight, flight not primarily physical, as that of the innocent maiden who flees from a sinister villain in the older Gothic tales, but flight psychological, desperate, and often vain. Modern Gothic

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<sup>13</sup>William Flint Thrall and Addison Hibbard, A Handbook to Literature, revised by C. Hugh Holman (New York, 1960), p. 216.

<sup>14</sup>Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York, 1965), p. 192.

<sup>15</sup>Robert S. Phillips, "The Gothic Architecture of The Member of the Wedding," Renascence, XVI (Winter, 1964), 62.

<sup>16</sup>Tennessee Williams, "Introduction," Reflections in a Golden Eye, Bantam Books (New York, 1967), p. x.

characters escape by extravagant daydreaming<sup>17</sup> that usually is carried on in a special place, a private, sheltered room<sup>18</sup> used as a refuge from the terror of modern existence. But the refuge is imperfect; dreams seldom are realized, and loneliness is omnipresent.<sup>19</sup>

The primary means of attempting to escape isolation in modern Gothic is through love. Leslie Fiedler notes that the modern Gothic novel concerns itself with love because "there can be no terror without the hope for love and love's defeat."<sup>20</sup> Love in modern Gothic, like flight, proves to be no escape. If love succeeds at all, the success is merely temporary, and the predicament of the lover is made all the more unbearable by his brief glimpse of salvation.<sup>21</sup> Any degree of success, however, is rare; for as Robert S. Phillips points out, "the lover [in modern Gothic] is forever rebuked, unrecognized, or the subject of mistaken intentions."<sup>22</sup> Misunderstandings are so frequent that

<sup>17</sup>Phillips, "Gothic Architecture," p. 60.

<sup>18</sup>Irving Malin, New American Gothic, Crosscurrents Modern Critiques (Carbondale, 1962), p. 83.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Leslie Fiedler, "The Pleasures of John Hawkes," Introduction to The Lime Twig (New York, 1961), p. ix, cited in Malin, New American Gothic, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 192.

<sup>22</sup>Phillips, "Gothic Architecture," p. 61.

characters often remain only potential lovers. Even the simplest attempts to communicate with others frequently fail. Meaningful communication seldom occurs, and successful love, therefore, is usually impossible.<sup>23</sup> The characters, despite their efforts to reach out to others, remain spiritually isolated.

Even familial love between parent and child is unsuccessful in modern Gothic. Irving Malin writes that "because the family is usually considered a stable unit, new American Gothic tries to destroy it--the assumption is that if the family cannot offer security, nothing can."<sup>24</sup> Healthy parent-child relationships occur infrequently. Often family ties are weak or nonexistent. Parents are portrayed as ineffectual--as incapable of understanding their children or of offering them emotional support. At times parents are depicted merely as hazy background figures who exert little apparent influence on the lives of their children.<sup>25</sup>

When parents are presented as strong characters, their influence is frequently destructive. They are consciously evil and either purposefully neglect their children or attempt to harm them physically or emotionally. If parent and child love one another, the love is often unhealthy. It

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> Malin, New American Gothic, p. 50.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

is a possessive love which cripples the child psychologically and keeps him forever dependent.<sup>26</sup> Leslie Fiedler describes this love as "unconsummated incest."<sup>27</sup> The theme of latent incest occurs frequently in modern Gothic. Irving Malin notes that "if we regard the incest as that of will rather than sex, we are close to the truth . . . of . . . Gothic fictions."<sup>28</sup>

Any type or degree of love or of communication, therefore, is destined to fail in the modern Gothic genre. Malin attributes the failure to the narcissism of the characters. They are absorbed in self-love to such an extent that any other type of love cannot succeed. The characters are so preoccupied with themselves and with their own problems that they have little time or emotional energy to devote to knowing or to understanding another person. When they find a love-object, they tend to project their own thoughts and desires into his personality instead of attempting to see him and to accept him as a person in his own right. The characters constantly are seeking their own images. Therefore, love becomes a threat to the love-object, who is as narcissistic as the lover. As Irving Malin writes:

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>27</sup>Leslie Fiedler, Love and Death in the American Novel, rev. ed. (New York, 1966), p. 348.

<sup>28</sup>Malin, New American Gothic, p. 68.

Others approach and create problems. The lovers feel that their narcissistic designs are being destroyed: they resent and want to destroy the others. But at the same time they want to communicate with them, if only to change them into reflections. If the others retain their identities, the lovers lose their security.<sup>29</sup>

The characters of modern Gothic, then, attempt to escape their loneliness by loving another, but the obstacles created by narcissism prove insurmountable. Love fails, and the characters return to the terrible safety of their spiritual isolation.<sup>30</sup>

Narcissism, however, cannot be described as the sole reason for the failure of love and of communication. It certainly figures largely in the motivation of the characters in modern Gothic, and it is perhaps the most obvious basis for their spiritual isolation. But love and communication can fail without apparent cause, and the inexplicable nature of the failure creates a special terror for those affected and for the reader. Terror in the modern Gothic mode often springs from the unknown, the imperceptible, the inexplicable, the mysterious. As Tennessee Williams explains:

The true sense of dread is not a reaction to anything sensible or visible or even, strictly materially, knowable. But rather it's a kind of spiritual intuition of something almost too

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

incredible and shocking to talk about . . . .  
 It is the incommunicable [italics mine] something  
 . . . which is so inspiring of dread among these  
 modern artists . . . .<sup>31</sup>

Williams' "incommunicable something" often appears to be a malevolence at work in the world, an unfathomable evil that renders the characters helpless. No matter how desperately they try to escape, spiritual isolation remains their fate. When the explanation of narcissism fails to account for the failure of love, the universal "awfulness"<sup>32</sup> becomes apparent, and there an even greater terror lies.

The artist, in presenting his vision of the terror inherent in the modern experience, frequently uses grotesque characters. The modern Gothic writers often people their novels with homosexuals, lunatics, impotent voyeurs, deaf-mutes, hunchbacks, and dwarfs. The grotesque physique and the abnormal or perverted posture symbolize human estrangement. Physical freaks and psychological misfits are almost unavoidably socially suspect, and therefore provide excellent symbols of spiritual isolation.<sup>33</sup> As Leslie Fiedler notes, "the characters are 'true' not in

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<sup>31</sup>Williams, "Introduction," Reflections in a Golden Eye, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., p. xiv.

<sup>33</sup>Phillips, "Gothic Architecture," p. 60.

their own right but as they symbolize in outward terms an inward reality."<sup>34</sup>

The monstrous, however, is used not only because it offers evidence of inner loneliness, but also because it reflects a modern world as twisted and as deformed as the body of a freak or the mind of a lunatic. Modern Gothic is, then, subjective. It projects the personal vision of the author;<sup>35</sup> and, as Tennessee Williams has pointed out, such writers apparently view contemporary society as horrifying.<sup>36</sup> Their symbols mirror this vision.

The characters of modern Gothic inhabit symbolic landscapes. The settings are often microcosmic depictions of a lonely world.<sup>37</sup> Frequently the microcosms are small Southern towns, for many of the writers of modern Gothic are of Southern origin. However, the sense of place in modern Gothic is not of such importance that the genre should be described as Southern. The themes of the novels are not regional, but universal. Spiritual isolation, for example, obviously is not an exclusive problem of the South.

<sup>34</sup>Fiedler, Love and Death, p. 141.

<sup>35</sup>Ihab H. Hassan, "Carson McCullers: The Alchemy of Love and Aesthetics of Pain," Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views, edited by Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston, 1963), p. 216.

<sup>36</sup>Williams, "Introduction," Reflections in a Golden Eye, pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>37</sup>Malin, New American Gothic, p. 5.

Many modern Gothic authors, such as J. D. Salinger and Nathaniel West, do not concern themselves with the South at all. They find their microcosms in the East and on the West Coast.<sup>38</sup> Again, the nature of modern Gothic renders particulars of place only of superficial importance. Settings are often the "merest of backdrops,"<sup>39</sup> for too great an emphasis on external realities would detract from the importance of the internal world in the genre.<sup>40</sup> Isolated microcosms are settings best suited to the needs of modern Gothic.

The microcosms are frequently the scenes of violent acts.<sup>41</sup> "Arson, rape, mutilation, suicide, and murder"<sup>42</sup> occur regularly in modern Gothic. Violence often results from the conflicts created by narcissism. The characters, who view a lover as a menace to the integrity of their narcissistic worlds, attempt to destroy the threat to their security.<sup>43</sup> The narcissist also views social or political

<sup>38</sup>William Van O'Connor, The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays, Crosscurrents Modern Critiques (Carbondale, 1962), p. 6.

<sup>39</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 127.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

<sup>41</sup>Phillips, "Gothic Architecture," p. 59.

<sup>42</sup>Louise Y. Gossett, "Introduction," Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (Durham, 1965), p. x.

<sup>43</sup>Malin, New American Gothic, p. 15.

institutions and members of different races as threatening. If a character cannot direct violence outwardly, he commits suicide or self-mutilation, or he internalizes his hostile feelings to such an extent that he destroys himself psychologically. Often violence in modern Gothic, like the failure of love, has no apparent cause. The inexplicable violence in particular is the modern Gothic writer's statement of the disorder of the universe.<sup>44</sup> He attempts to awaken the reader to an awareness "of what a chamber of horrors its own smugly regarded world"<sup>45</sup> really is.

This vision of the world as a "chamber of horrors" is offensive to some critics. For example, Robert O. Bowen writes that modern Gothic novels "are subversive of literature itself; for, by its nature, literature is a statement of faith and of hope. When despair becomes its statement, the art has ended."<sup>46</sup> Bowen's assertion that literature must be a "statement of faith and of hope" is subject to question. Literature is often a reflection of the needs and the shortcomings of its age, and there is much in the contemporary world that is conducive to despair. Bowen's distaste for a literature of darkness is shared by

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<sup>44</sup>Gossett, "Introduction," Violence, p. x.

<sup>45</sup>Fiedler, Love and Death, p. 135.

<sup>46</sup>Robert O. Bowen, "Hope vs. Despair in the New Gothic Novel," Renascence, XIII (Spring, 1961), 152.

Leslie Fiedler. However, unlike Bowen, Fiedler is able to put his personal feelings aside and recognize, grudgingly, the justification for modern Gothic's existence. Fiedler explains:

Modern war and the twentieth-century city have struck our novelists as phenomena more irrational and terrifying than the ghosts and haunted castles to which the gothic first addressed itself. The tale of terror seems more and more the most prophetic of all fictional genres: invented in the first surge of reaction to the Age of Reason, driven underground in a succeeding period of progress and civil peace, but again come into its own in an era of universal war, alienation from nature, failed revolutions, genocide, and ideological self-deception.<sup>47</sup>

Indeed, the elements of modern Gothic reflect authorial visions of despair and of terror. Spiritual isolation, the failure of love, frantic flight, grotesque characters, bizarre acts, violence, ineffective or destructive family relationships, and crippling narcissism are common to the genre. However, as Irving Malin emphasizes, the concern with the common vision of terror and the objectification of this terror in certain common elements does not prevent the modern Gothic writer from showing "admirable creativity."<sup>48</sup> Each author's treatment is "highly individual."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>Fiedler, Love and Death, p. 47.

<sup>48</sup>Malin, New American Gothic, p. 49.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

The succeeding chapters of this thesis are concerned with Carson McCullers' method of handling the Gothic. Their purpose is to describe the modern Gothic elements in McCullers' first three novels: The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (1940), Reflections in a Golden Eye (1941), The Member of the Wedding (1946) and in her novella: The Ballad of the Sad Café (1943).

No attention will be given to McCullers' last novel, Clock Without Hands (1961), a work considered by most critics to be far inferior to her earlier writings. Lawrence Graver, for example, describes the novel as "an unhappy reminder of a talent no longer at full strength."<sup>50</sup> The inferiority of the novel can be attributed at least partially to the series of personal and physical problems that beset McCullers later in life and prevented her from writing more than one page a day.<sup>51</sup> The primary reason for omitting the novel from this thesis, however, is McCullers' abandonment of the modern Gothic theme of spiritual isolation which is the concern of her earlier major works. In Clock Without Hands she attempts, with unfortunate results, a dual narrative purpose. She portrays the existential theme of "the search

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<sup>50</sup> Lawrence Graver, Carson McCullers, University of Minnesota Pamphlets of American Writers, No. 84 (Minneapolis, 1969), p. 43.

<sup>51</sup> Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 170.

for self,"<sup>52</sup> while at the same time trying, by using various characters as symbols of different "facets of the Southern temper," to make the novel an allegory describing the struggle between the liberal Southerner and the reactionary Southerner.<sup>53</sup>

Neither will attention be given to McCullers' short stories or to her two plays: The Member of the Wedding (1950) and The Square Root of Wonderful (1958). McCullers' first three novels and one novella provide the best examples in her writings of the modern Gothic genre.

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<sup>52</sup>Ibid., p. 173.

<sup>53</sup>Dale Edmonds, Carson McCullers, Southern Writers Series, No. 6 (Austin, 1969), p. 32.

## CHAPTER II

### MODERN GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER

The modern Gothic theme of spiritual isolation is evident in Carson McCullers' novels. Indeed, McCullers writes that "my first book was concerned with this, almost entirely, and all of my books since, in one way or another."<sup>1</sup> McCullers, like most modern Gothic authors, writes of isolation because it is integral to her view of life.<sup>2</sup> In the following autobiographical passage, she describes her first awareness of estrangement:

When I was a child of almost four, I was walking with my nurse past a convent. For once, the convent doors were open. And I saw the children eating ice-cream cones, playing on iron swings, and I watched, fascinated. I wanted to go in, but my nurse said no, I was not Catholic. The next day the gate was shut. But, year after year, I thought of what was going on, of this wonderful party, where I was shut out. I wanted to climb the wall, but I was too little. I beat on the wall once, and I knew all the time that there was a marvelous party going on, but I couldn't get in.

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<sup>1</sup>Carson McCullers, "The Flowering Dream," Esquire, LII (December, 1959), 162.

<sup>2</sup>Ihab H. Hassan, "Carson McCullers' The Alchemy of Love and Aesthetics of Pain," Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views, edited by Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston, 1963), p. 216.

<sup>3</sup>McCullers, "Flowering Dream," p. 162.

As Carson McCullers grew older, her sense of loneliness and separateness increased. In early adolescence, she felt different from other girls because she was extremely tall for her age. When she went to parties, her height kept the boys from asking her to dance, and Carson's sensitivity made the rejection particularly painful.<sup>4</sup> Later, the liberal political and social views that she developed early in life made her feel like an outsider in her conservative hometown of Columbus, Georgia.<sup>5</sup> As she began writing, she also became aware of what Oliver Evans describes as "the sense of difference that separates creative from ordinary people . . . ."<sup>6</sup>

Carson experienced the special loneliness that arises from the failure of love during her unhappy marriage to Reeves McCullers. Reeves wanted to be a writer, but he could make a success neither of a writing career nor of a business career. As Carson became increasingly disillusioned with Reeves, and as Reeves, in turn, became increasingly jealous of his wife's success, the marriage began to disintegrate.<sup>7</sup> Carson divorced Reeves,<sup>8</sup> but later

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<sup>4</sup>Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York, 1965), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 59.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 86.

remarried him after he returned from World War II.<sup>9</sup> The second marriage was even more unhappy than the first. Reeves became a heavy user of alcohol and narcotics, and when he was under their influence, he abused and threatened his wife.<sup>10</sup> Finally Carson left him because she feared for her physical safety. In December, 1953, a few weeks after her departure, Reeves committed suicide by taking an overdose of sleeping pills.<sup>11</sup> Before Carson had a chance to recover completely from the shock of Reeves' death, her mother died,<sup>12</sup> and she was left to face pain-filled years of rapidly declining health without the support of the two people for whom she cared the most.<sup>13</sup> Carson McCullers' personal experiences, therefore, indeed would be conducive to the development of a view of life in which isolation figures prominently.

Carson McCullers' first novel, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, is set in the modern South, but the presentation of realistic details of the Southern locale is subordinate to the establishment of a lonely world. The small city in which the story takes place is not given a name. It is referred to simply as "the town." McCullers develops a universality by having her characters describe the town as

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 162.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., pp. 188-189.

"ordinary," as "about like any other place."<sup>14</sup> In this typical place move characters burdened by isolation: "Often in the faces along the streets there was the desperate look of loneliness" (p. 4). Spiritual isolation afflicts, in particular, the five main characters of the novel: John Singer, Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, and Benedict Copeland.

John Singer is a deaf-mute who loves another mute, Spiros Antonopoulos. Singer makes Antonopoulos the center of his existence. The two men live together and leave each other only to go to their jobs. For ten years Singer finds happiness in his insular life with Antonopoulos. Then the Greek becomes mentally ill and is committed to the state asylum by his cousin, Charles Parker. Singer is distraught. He walks aimlessly "through the streets of the town, always silent and alone" (p. 9). Other characters befriend Singer, but the mute lives only for his visits to the asylum. After a year of institutionalization, Antonopoulos dies of a kidney disease. Singer, unable to bear the loneliness created by the death of his love-object, commits suicide.

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<sup>14</sup>Carson McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Bantam Books (New York, 1953), p. 51. All subsequent references to this novel will be to this edition and will be cited in this chapter by page number in parentheses following each quotation.

Another victim of isolation is Mick Kelly, an adolescent girl whose family runs the boardinghouse in which Singer dies. Mick has no close friends. At home her only companions are very young children, and at school she is an outsider. Mick decides to make friends by giving a party. During the party, however, Mick realizes that no one is interested in her and that no friendships will result from her efforts. She decides that she will no longer attempt to escape loneliness by seeking friends among her schoolmates. Mick thinks, "It was O.K. about the ruined party. But it was all over. It was the end" (p. 98).

Mick finds temporary solace in a relationship with her teen-aged neighbor, Harry Minowitz. Their companionship ends after an initial sexual experience which brings them unhappiness. Mick feels "very old, and it was like something was heavy inside her. She was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be or not" (p. 236). Harry, afraid that his mother will guess what has happened between him and Mick, runs away to Alabama. Mick's sense of estrangement from society is increased by the failure of her brief love affair with Harry. She begins to depend heavily on John Singer for comfort. Singer's suicide leaves her completely isolated.

Mick attempts to escape her isolation through psychological flight. She retreats to an "inside room," an imaginary place in which she spends hours daydreaming:<sup>15</sup>

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. Mister Singer was in both rooms. Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room. . . . 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. (pp. 138-139)

Mick dreams most often of becoming a famous composer and of directing her own orchestra. But her dreams begin to fail:

. . . now no music was in her mind. It was like she was shut out from the inside room. Sometimes a quick little tune would come and go--but she never went into the inside room with music like she used to do. . . . And she wanted to stay in the inside room but she didn't know how. (p. 301)

When Mick's dreams no longer offer her comfort, she realizes that she truly is trapped in her isolation. With this realization comes the modern Gothic sense of terror. Mick describes this feeling as "a terrible afraidness" (p. 262). She notes that "sometimes she would look all around her quick and this panic would come in her" (p. 270). Unlike Singer, however, Mick chooses life, even though she recognizes the terror of its lonely futility. She thinks, "What good was it? That was the question she would like to know. What the hell good was it" (p. 299)?

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<sup>15</sup>Irving Malin, *New American Gothic, Crosscurrents Modern Critiques* (Carbondale, 1962), p. 83.

Love and communication also elude Benedict Copeland, a Negro physician who dedicates his life to the betterment of his race.<sup>16</sup> Copeland's education and philosophical beliefs set him apart from the rest of the Black community. Copeland is an avid reader of Karl Marx and sees possible salvation for the Negro in the practice of Marxist theories. Copeland tirelessly preaches Marxism to his people, but they fail to understand and listen only from politeness. Copeland is also an atheist. He abhors the humble passivity that religion appears to foster in the Negro, but he is unable to convince anyone that religion is harmful to the Black cause. At a family reunion Copeland's relatives listen attentively to a Bible reading while Copeland is described as feeling "isolated and angry and alone" (p. 124). Copeland's advocacy of birth control also is unsuccessful. His patients not only refuse to follow his advice but also name the resulting children after Copeland. Copeland's frustration and bitterness make him difficult to live with. Finally his wife, Daisy, deserts him. He is "left an old man in an empty house" (p. 122), without love and without understanding.

After Daisy leaves, Copeland contracts tuberculosis. The disease eventually prevents the doctor from continuing his practice. He is forced to move to the distant farm of

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<sup>16</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 192.

his in-laws. Copeland realizes that the move means the end of his efforts to help his people. "For forty years his mission was his life and his life was his mission. And yet all remained to be done and nothing was completed" (p. 287). As Copeland is being driven to the farm by his father-in-law, he makes a final attempt to communicate his beliefs. The failure of the attempt epitomizes the general failure of communication throughout Copeland's life:

He felt the fire in him and he could not be still. He wanted to sit up and speak in a loud voice . . . . The words in his heart grew big and they would not be silent. But the old man had ceased to listen and there was no one to hear him. (p. 287)

Another apostle of Marx who suffers from isolation is Jake Blount, a disturbed alcoholic who travels from town to town attempting to awaken workers to the evils of capitalism. Blount's separateness is established early in the novel:

He was like a man who had served a term in prison or had lived for a long time with foreigners in South America. He was like a person who had been somewhere that other people are not likely to go or had done something that others are not apt to do. (p. 17)

Blount is considered a maniac by the townspeople. His efforts to express his Marxist philosophy are met with derision. In frustration Blount asks, "When a person knows and can't make the others understand, what does he do" (p. 18)?

Blount senses that there is no answer to his question and that there is, therefore, no permanent escape from his isolation. The realization brings him the same overpowering sense of fear which affects Mick: "The loneliness in him was so keen that he was filled with terror" (p. 130). Blount attempts to escape by drinking heavily, but his fear is not assuaged.

In desperation Blount, like Mick, turns to John Singer for comfort. McCullers describes the effect of Singer's death on Blount:

Singer was dead. And the way he had felt when he first heard that he had killed himself was not sad--it was angry. He was before a wall. He remembered all the innermost thoughts that he had told to Singer, and with his death it seemed to him that they were lost. And why had Singer wanted to end his life? Maybe he had gone insane. But anyway he was dead, dead, dead. He could not be seen or touched or spoken to . . . . He was alone.  
(pp. 291-292)

Blount decides that he can remain in the town no longer, but the obvious implication of the novel is that moving will not help. Isolation and terror have accompanied Blount throughout previous travels, and they are likely to remain with him in subsequent moves.

Isolation and terror also are experienced by Biff Brannon, the owner of the New York Café, a small restaurant which serves as a meeting place for the principals of the novel. Brannon's primary role is that of a detached, contemplative observer of the action occurring in his

café.<sup>17</sup> At times, however, Brannon forsakes the security of his aloofness to make tentative forays into the mainstream of life in the town. The forays usually end unhappily. For example, Brannon forms an attachment to Mick which gradually grows into love. Mick, however, misunderstands Brannon's feelings. She thinks:

He had always had this grudge against her. He always spoke to her in this rough voice different from the way he talked to other people. Was it because he knew about the time she and Bubber swiped a pack of chewing gum off his counter? She hated him. (p. 146)

Brannon's unsuccessful love for Mick is his last attempt to escape loneliness through a relationship with a woman. He is now weary, middle-aged, and impotent. Brannon reflects, "Who would he be loving now? No one person. . . . He had known his loves and they were over. . . . Finished" (p. 305). Brannon still admires "those who labor and . . . those who--one word--love," but any thought of seeking love again brings him "a shaft of terror" (p. 306). Brannon chooses the safety that he finds in his observer's role at the café. He spends his time watching his customers and daydreaming of a happier life.

The major characters of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter also are afflicted by narcissism.<sup>18</sup> John Singer projects

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>18</sup> Malin, New American Gothic, p. 21.

into Antonapoulos qualities that he finds desirable, qualities that Antonapoulos obviously does not possess. For example, Singer describes his friend's smile as "very subtle and wise" (p. 6). The author describes the smile as "stupid" (p. 1). Singer talks at great length to Antonapoulos and believes that the Greek understands all that is said. In reality, Antonapoulos is so feeble-minded that he thinks only of eating, sleeping, and drinking. Singer does not love Antonapoulos as he really is; he loves the imaginary being that he has created to satisfy his own desires. Singer, therefore, is a narcissist.

Biff Brannon gives evidence of narcissism by his frequently professed affection for freaks. Irving Malin points out that "Brannon sees himself in them; he does not accept them for what they are."<sup>19</sup> Brannon's oddness is not on a par with that of the hunchbacks and the cripples that he befriends. However, Brannon may be considered a freak, for he is sexually impotent and has strong feminine tendencies. He wears perfume, washes his hair with his wife's scented shampoo, and often daydreams of being a mother. When Brannon tells his wife that he likes freaks, she replies, "I reckon you do! I just reckon you certainly ought to, Mister Brannon--being as you're one yourself" (p. 11).

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

Mick Kelly is narcissistic in her complete preoccupation with herself.<sup>20</sup> She wants friends not because she has a sincere interest in other people but because she believes that friends will end her loneliness and will provide an audience for her dreams. Mick needs someone to listen to her problems, but she has the narcissistic fear that close friends will violate her private world. As Lawrence Graver notes, "although she wants desperately to connect with other people, she cultivates those qualities of talent and personality that might bring her increased separateness . . . ." <sup>21</sup> Mick shares none of the interests of girls of her own age. She insists on dressing like a boy and wants to take mechanics in school. When she is not daydreaming, she is writing in her journal or is composing music. She realizes that others find her habits peculiar, but she makes no effort to change. She prefers loneliness to the sacrifice of her unusual life style.

Jack Blount and Benedict Copeland are narcissistic in their total absorption with the achievement of their personal political and social objectives. As David Madden points out, Blount and Copeland use a radical, unyielding approach which has the effect of "alienating the very people they wish to

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Lawrence Graver, Carson McCullers, University of Minnesota Pamphlets of American Writers, No. 84 (Minneapolis, 1969), p. 19.

convince."<sup>22</sup> The primary purpose in the continuation of their fruitless struggle becomes the satisfaction of personal needs. Also, Blount and Copeland are self-assertive to the extent that they are incapable of working together despite the many goals that they share. Although Blount and Copeland are the only Marxists in the town, a conference between the two men degenerates into a violent argument. Neither man is willing to change his methods. Blount calls Copeland's ideas "crazy," and Copeland maintains that Blount "doesn't have good sense" (p. 261). Their narcissism makes communication impossible.

McCullers appears to suggest in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter that narcissism plays an important part in religion. Lawrence Graver writes that "McCullers wants us to see Singer as an ironic God figure, a product of mass wish-fulfillment."<sup>23</sup> Biff Brannon observes that "Blount and Mick made of him a sort of homemade God. Owing to the fact he was a mute they were able to give him all the qualities they wanted him to have" (p. 199). The other people of the town also project themselves into Singer. McCullers writes:

The Jews said that he was a Jew. The merchants along the main street claimed he received a large

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<sup>22</sup>David Madden, "The Paradox of the Need for Privacy and the Need for Understanding in Carson McCullers' 'The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter,'" Literature and Psychology, XVII (1967), 138.

<sup>23</sup>Graver, Carson McCullers, p. 17.

legacy and was a very rich man. It was whispered in one browbeaten textile union that the mute was an organizer for the C.I.O. A lone Turk . . . claimed passionately to his wife that the mute was Turkish . . . . (p. 170)

Graver points out that "through the passion with which each constructs the god he needs, he bears ironical witness to the many and wayward forms of human mythmaking."<sup>24</sup>

In reality, of course, the John Singer that the townspeople create does not exist. Only Biff Brannon senses the religious portent of the relationship between Singer and the other characters, and he alone, therefore, is aware of the true depth of modern Gothic terror. Brannon thinks, "There was something not natural about it all--something like an ugly joke. When he thought of it he felt uneasy and in some unknown way afraid" (p. 306).

Refuge from terror and isolation cannot be found in family ties in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. John Singer is an orphan, and Jake Blount's family has so little influence in his life that his parents are not mentioned. Mick Kelly's parents, as Irving Malin notes, are mere "shadows."<sup>25</sup> They are presented as vague figures so preoccupied with their own problems that they are unable to help their troubled daughter. Benedict Copeland is a strong parent, but his relationship with his children is unhappy. He

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>25</sup>Malin, New American Gothic, p. 55.

alienates them by trying to force them to follow his radical beliefs.<sup>26</sup> Biff Brannon's unnaturally close relationship with his mother may be described as an example of the latent incest theme in modern Gothic. Brannon prefers his mother to all other women. His inability to transfer the love that he feels for her to another woman is the probable cause of his impotence. The family relationships in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, therefore, are either weak or destructive.

The modern Gothic element of violence also is found in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. In addition to John Singer's suicide, which is the most important act of violence in the novel, there are frequent minor violent episodes. For example, Benedict Copeland's son Willie stabs another Negro in a barroom fight and is imprisoned. While he is in prison, a white guard punishes him for a minor offense by hanging him by the feet in freezing weather. Willie's legs have to be amputated. The elder Copeland goes to the courthouse to protest his son's treatment, and there he is beaten by white deputies who describe the doctor as a "biggity nigger" (p. 223). The deputies are angered by Copeland's pride and intelligence. Copeland does not fit the Negro stereotype formed by white racism. His beating,

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

therefore, is an example of violence precipitated by a threat to the narcissistic concept of racial supremacy.<sup>27</sup>

Other violent racial conflicts occur often in the novel. A Negro man who moves into a white section of town is beaten by his neighbors. Several fights between Negroes and Whites take place at a small fair, the Sunny Dixie Show, which employs Jake Blount as a mechanic. Blount attempts to stop one particularly serious battle, but he soon becomes involved in the fighting. He fights in a blind rage until he is knocked out. When Blount regains consciousness, he discovers that he is lying next to the dead body of a young Negro, and he begins to fear that he may have murdered the boy during the fighting.

Inexplicable acts of violence also occur in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Although racial hatred is responsible for the majority of the fights at the Sunny Dixie Show, Jake Blount notes that "sometimes two friends would come to the show arm in arm, laughing and drinking--and before they left they would be struggling together in a panting rage" (p. 245). Another example of senseless violence involves Mick Kelly's younger brother Bubber. While playing with a loaded rifle, Bubber deliberately aims the gun at a young neighborhood girl and wounds her in the head. Bubber

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<sup>27</sup>Louise Y. Gossett, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (Durham, 1965), p. 173.

cannot offer a reason for his action. He likes the little girl and regrets having shot her. The inexplicable acts of violence in the novel are particularly effective in producing an atmosphere of terror because they are unexpected, and they, therefore, seem especially violent and shocking.

In addition to violence, McCullers also employs the grotesque in creating terror in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.<sup>28</sup> McCullers frequently uses the word freak to describe her characters. It is applied with good reason to Jake Blount, to Biff Brannon, to John Singer, and to several patrons of the New York Café. Jake Blount is emotionally unstable, and his body is "deformed" (p. 17). Biff Brannon is effeminate and impotent. John Singer is a mute, and he has a strange love relationship with Antonapoulos, the fat, feeble-minded deaf-mute who is the most obviously grotesque character in the novel. Several of the townspeople are described as being hunchbacks and cripples.

McCullers' primary purpose in using grotesque characters is the portrayal of spiritual isolation.<sup>29</sup> As Oliver Evans points out:

Of the various symbols for loneliness and incompleteness in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter,

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<sup>28</sup>Robert S. Phillips, "The Gothic Architecture of The Member of the Wedding," Renascence, XVI (Winter, 1964), 62.

<sup>29</sup>McCullers, "Flowering Dream," p. 163.

physical deformity and freakishness are the most obvious, and this explains not only the presence of many freakish characters in the book but also the constant references to freakishness.<sup>30</sup>

As is common in modern Gothic, therefore, the grotesques in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter symbolize the loneliness and the terror of the modern experience.

Terror in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter primarily springs from the feeling of being hopelessly isolated. The characters try desperately to love and to communicate, but their efforts meet with failure. Of the five major characters, only John Singer is successful in love. He enjoys a period of spiritual happiness before his love-object, Antonapoulos, is taken from him. Antonapoulos is emotionally and mentally incapable of reciprocating Singer's love, but as Oliver Evans points out, "it is one of the characteristics of ideal romantic love, derived from Platonism, that it need not be reciprocal; the beloved, indeed, may even be unaware of the lover's existence . . . ."31

Similar to Singer's unreciprocated love for Antonapoulos is Biff Brannon's hopeless love for Mick Kelly. Brannon, however, does not achieve the release from loneliness experienced by Singer, for his affection for

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<sup>30</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 51.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

Mick is of short duration, possibly because Biff's first allegiance is to his mother, and it is tainted with guilt arising from the difference in Biff's and Mick's ages. Copeland and Blount are too obsessed with their social objectives to find love-objects. Their search is for communication, but communication is denied them by their narcissism.<sup>32</sup> Mick Kelly also is prevented by her narcissism from experiencing love.<sup>33</sup> The major characters, therefore, are prevented from achieving lasting success in love and in communication either by faults in their personalities, or, as in the case of John Singer, by an uncontrollable fate. Biff, Mick, Copeland, and Blount are aware that they are denied love and communication, and the awareness brings them anxiety and terror. They, however, actually have never experienced the love or the communication that they seek, and they, therefore, do not experience the deep, suicide-inducing despair of John Singer, who has known love and has had it snatched away.<sup>34</sup>

The loveless predicament of the major characters is contrasted by a happy and lastingly successful love relationship involving two minor characters: Copeland's daughter, Portia, and her husband, Highboy. The happiness

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<sup>32</sup>Madden, "Paradox," p. 138.

<sup>33</sup>Graver, Carson McCullers, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 44.

and emotional normalcy of Portia and Highboy emphasize the pathetic deprivation of the other characters.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, since McCullers chooses to make Portia and Highboy only minor characters, she perhaps is saying that a terror-filled world of spiritual isolation must remain the lot of most modern men.

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

### CHAPTER III

#### MODERN GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN REFLECTIONS

#### IN A GOLDEN EYE

Carson McCullers uses a nameless army post in the South as the microcosmic setting of her second novel, Reflections in a Golden Eye. The quiet scene gradually is enveloped by an atmosphere of terror as McCullers reveals the shocking aberrations of its inhabitants.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, as Lawrence Graver writes, McCullers creates "a swamp where no light shines and no people live."<sup>2</sup> The deviations of the characters are so subtle and so appalling that the grotesque is the most immediately obvious modern Gothic element in the novel.

For example, the protagonist, Captain Weldon Penderton, is a homosexual who often is attracted to his wife's lovers. He is a sadist who receives pleasure from abusing animals and, in turn, enjoys torturing himself. He allows, if not encourages, his wife to have affairs, although he is tormented by jealousy both of her and of her lovers. He fears horses and yet forces himself to ride frequently. He

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<sup>1</sup>Louise Y. Gossett, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (Durham, 1965), p. 161.

<sup>2</sup>Lawrence Graver, Carson McCullers, University of Minnesota Pamphlets of American Writers, No. 84 (Minneapolis, 1969), p. 21.

is "keenly sensitive to luxury and a finicky dresser," but he wears "only the coarsest sleeping garments."<sup>3</sup> Captain Penderton is also a kleptomaniac. In keeping with his masochistic and homosexual tendencies, he presented the first article that he remembers stealing as a "love offering" (p. 53) to a boy who had beaten him.<sup>4</sup>

The other major characters are also grotesque. Private Ellgee Williams is a strangely quiet young man who has a morbid fear of women until he accidentally sees Penderton's wife, Leonora, standing naked in front of the open door of her house and experiences a strong attraction to her. Previously, Williams' only pleasures were found in horseback riding nude through the woods and in caring for the horses at the camp stable. Now he becomes a voyeur,<sup>5</sup> stealthily entering the Penderton house at night to crouch until dawn over the oblivious, sleeping body of Leonora.

Leonora Penderton is promiscuous and feeble-minded. Her nearest neighbor and current lover, Major Morris Langdon, is almost as depthless as she. Langdon's wife, Alison, is a

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<sup>3</sup>Carson McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye, Bantam Books (New York, 1967), p. 138. All subsequent references to this novel will be to this edition and will be cited in this chapter by page number in parentheses following each quotation.

<sup>4</sup>Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York, 1965), p. 65.

<sup>5</sup>Dale Edmonds, Carson McCullers, Southern Writers Series, No. 6 (Austin, 1969), p. 18.

mentally disturbed invalid who once "cut off the tender nipples of her breasts with the garden shears" (p. 32). Alison's closest companion is her Filipino houseboy, Anacleto. Anacleto is a childish, dependent, asexual creature who "exists only in terms of his mistress."<sup>6</sup>

As in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, McCullers uses the grotesque in Reflections in a Golden Eye to symbolize man's estrangement.<sup>7</sup> She points out in "The Flowering Dream" that "the fact that Captain Penderton . . . is a homosexual, is . . . a symbol, of handicap and impotence."<sup>8</sup> The aberrations of the characters prevent them from escaping loneliness through communication and love.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the characters are so crippled emotionally that love has little chance to develop. The grotesques, therefore, depict the modern Gothic theme of spiritual isolation. As Dale Edmonds notes, they "may be seen as symbolic reflections of the state of man."<sup>10</sup>

The most striking figure of isolation in the novel is Private Williams. His isolation is so complete that he is described as having "neither an enemy nor a friend" (p. 2)

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 76.

<sup>8</sup> Carson McCullers, "The Flowering Dream," Esquire, LII (December, 1959), 163.

<sup>9</sup> Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 69.

<sup>10</sup> Edmonds, Carson McCullers, p. 19.

in his barracks. Williams never attempts to initiate a conversation, and he keeps himself as withdrawn as possible from the camp life around him. McCullers writes:

Private Williams did not smoke, drink, fornicate, or gamble. In the barracks he kept to himself and was something of a mystery to the other men. Most of his leisure time Private Williams spent out in the woods surrounding the post. . . . Except for riding, Private Williams cared for none of the sports available to enlisted men. No one had ever seen him in the gym or at the swimming pool. Nor had he ever been known to laugh, to become angry, or to suffer in any way.  
(p. 3)

The only person with whom Williams desires contact is Leonora Penderton, but the nature of the contact does not include communication. Williams wishes only to watch her as she sleeps and to enjoy the sensual feeling that he gains from his voyeurism. He does not think of her as a living person to whom he might talk or make love. For Williams she exists only "in the room where he had watched her in the night with such absorption" (p. 137). Williams is incapable of understanding the emotions that Leonora arouses in him, for his intellect is stunted. Williams' mind is described as being "without delineation, void of form" (p. 101). Love and communication are beyond his mental range.

Love also escapes Captain Penderton. He merely tolerates his wife. Because of his homosexual tendencies, he and Leonora do not have even a physical relationship. The "emotional regard" that Penderton feels for his wife's

lover, Major Langdon, is "the nearest thing to love that he had ever known" (p. 33). Although Penderton is incapable of loving a woman, he refuses to allow himself to love a man. He fights his homosexual feelings; for, as Oliver Evans writes, the Captain, "in spite of his idiosyncrasies, . . . is essentially a conventional man, and acknowledges the values of his associates."<sup>11</sup> All avenues of adult love, therefore, are closed to Captain Penderton.

Penderton's estrangement is increased when he forms a strange attachment to Ellgee Williams. Captain Penderton first becomes aware of Williams when the Private spills coffee on him while serving at a social function. The Captain is only slightly irritated with the soldier on this occasion, but the irritation grows when Williams later ruins some yard work at the Penderton house. The irritation develops into hatred when the Private, on one of his nude rides in the woods, discovers Penderton beating Leonora's horse and takes the animal away. The hatred is combined with sexual desire, for the Captain is attracted strongly by the sight of Williams' young male body. Penderton gradually becomes obsessed with Williams. He begins to follow the soldier about the post in hopes of precipitating some form of contact. When opportunities arise, however, Penderton cannot gather the courage to speak. The Captain's

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<sup>11</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 68.

frustration gradually destroys him. He no longer can concentrate on the military duties that previously have given his life order and have enabled him to retain his tenuous hold on sanity. He loses interest in other people and begins to withdraw completely.<sup>12</sup>

Leonora Penderton is capable of love, but only in a physical way. Her feeble-mindedness prevents spiritual or intellectual communication. Leonora is matched perfectly to Morris Langdon because he also is limited intellectually and expects no more than sensual pleasures from a relationship. Oliver Evans describes Leonora's affair with Langdon as "a mere mating of animals."<sup>13</sup> He points out that "McCullers seems in fact to be saying that physical love has the greatest chance of success where the spiritual potential is slightest . . . ."<sup>14</sup> Leonora and Langdon never achieve a complete love relationship. Their escape from estrangement, therefore, is limited. They enjoy a physical relationship, but they remain spiritually uncommitted and undeveloped.

Alison Langdon is isolated in an unhappy marriage. The marriage has been a mismatch from its beginning, for Alison and Major Langdon have no common interests. She enjoys good

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<sup>12</sup>Gossett, Violence, p. 163.

<sup>13</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 70.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

literature and classical music, while the Major reads only pulp magazines and likes popular dance tunes. He describes listening to Bach as "like swallowing a bunch of angle-worms" (p. 82). The marriage further disintegrates after Alison undergoes a series of illnesses that prevent her from accompanying her husband to the military social activities that he loves. The Major turns to other women, leaving Alison alone except for the company of Anacleto.

Although Alison's relationship with Anacleto is close, it does not release Alison from loneliness. Anacleto is too uneducated and too childish to provide Alison with the intellectual companionship that she desires. She forms an intellectually satisfying friendship with a minor character, Lieutenant Weincheck, but she realizes that their companionship will end soon, for the Lieutenant is retiring and will be leaving the post. Alison becomes emotionally incapable of seeking other friends when two events occur that combine to destroy her mentally. She gives birth to a deformed baby, Catherine, that dies, and she learns of her husband's affair with Leonora. McCullers describes Alison as "tortured to the bone by grief and anxiety so that now she was on the verge of actual lunacy" (p. 19). Alison's self-mutilation is an indication of the extent of her despair. After the mutilation, Alison develops a strong fear of herself, of

other people, and of life in general and retreats into the isolated world of a bedridden invalid.

Anacleto often amuses Alison while she is ill by painting for her. Once he imagines painting a peacock with a golden eye in which can be seen grotesque reflections. Dale Edmonds writes that "the peacock's reflecting eye may be likened to the mirror of art which is held up to reality; . . . the artist's mirror reflects the grotesqueness of the characters."<sup>15</sup> Edmonds further writes that "the image of the peacock's eye as a mirror--the prime symbol of narcissism" suggests the interpretation that the isolation and unhappiness of the characters is caused mainly by their narcissism.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, of the major characters, only Private Williams cannot be described as a narcissist, for he is too withdrawn and too slumbrous mentally to display even selfishness. Captain Penderton, for example, is too absorbed with himself and with his perverted obsession to engage in normal communication.<sup>17</sup> His mind constantly is occupied with thoughts of Private Williams. He has no room in his life for a sincere interest in others. The Captain is concerned only with what directly affects him. Other people are irritations that must be handled with as little trouble as possible. Even the admiration which

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<sup>15</sup> Edmonds, Carson McCullers, p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

Penderton once felt for Major Langdon fades. Consequently, the Captain denies himself the simple emotional support that friendships might bring.

Alison Langdon and Anacleto are narcissistic to the extent that they have little regard for anyone except themselves and Lieutenant Weincheck. McCullers writes of Anacleto:

It was common knowledge that he thought the Lord had blundered grossly in the making of everyone except himself and Madame Alison--the sole exceptions to this were people behind footlights, midgets, great artists, and such-like fabulous folk. (p. 43)

Anacleto confides to Alison that he hates people, and Alison reflects that "she also loathed people. Everyone she had known in the past five years was somehow wrong--that is, everyone except Weincheck and of course Anacleto and little Catherine" (p. 86). Therefore, even if Alison had not become too emotionally ill to form friendships, her narcissism would have made it difficult for her to find people that she considered worthy of her.

Alison's narcissism also adversely affects Anacleto. Anacleto has been extremely dependent upon Alison since she brought him to America from the Philippines as a young boy. He is a very poor houseboy and quite likely would not be considered employable by anyone except Alison. Alison knows that her health is so poor that she will die within a short time, but she makes no provisions for Anacleto other

than extracting what she realizes is an unreliable promise from her husband to care for him. Alison would be lost if she did not have Anacleto with her constantly to pamper her and to amuse her; therefore she selfishly allows him to tie himself to her. She neglects to provide him with education or training that would enable him to care for himself after her death. Through her narcissism Alison ensures Anacleto's future destruction.

Leonora Penderton and Morris Langdon also are narcissists. They allow nothing to interfere with their sensual enjoyments. They realize that Alison is very ill and that they are torturing her with their affair, but they make no effort to stop seeing one another or even to conceal their relationship. As a result, they make themselves unhappy with guilt feelings. Langdon tries to convince himself that Alison is unaware of his feelings for Leonora, but McCullers writes that "the strain of not realizing the truth had given him hemorrhoids and had almost upset his good digestion" (p. 37).

When Alison dies, Langdon suffers further guilt feelings over events that immediately precede her death. Late one night Alison sees Private Williams enter the Penderton home. She at first believes that the Private is her husband on his way to an assignation with Leonora. After Alison enters Leonora's room and discovers her mistake, she finds Captain

Penderton and tells him that he should go to his wife. The Captain, thinking that Langdon is with Leonora and fearing an unpleasant confrontation, chooses to believe that Alison has completely lost her mind and is imagining things. He returns Alison to her house where he, with considerable relief, sees her husband. Alison tells Major Langdon that "not only did Leonora deceive her husband--but that she deceived the Major as well, and with an enlisted man" (p. 115).

Langdon decides that Alison indeed has lost her mind and commits her to an asylum for the mentally and physically ill. He chooses the hospital "more because of the price (it was astonishingly expensive) than for the therapeutic reputation" (p. 117). Here Langdon's narcissism enters, for he is concerned more with making an impression by his ability to afford the institution than with guaranteeing Alison adequate care. Alison's hospitalization also will enable the Major to continue his affair with Leonora without having to contend with his wife's disapproving presence. Unfortunately, Alison dies during her second night at the hospital, alone except for Anacleto. Major Langdon torments himself with guilt over Alison and over Anacleto, who disappears. Even his relationship with Leonora suffers. It loses its gaiety and takes on a morbidity as Langdon and his mistress talk continually about Alison and her houseboy.

Even the family ties that are detailed in Reflections in a Golden Eye are destructive. Ellgee Williams' father, for example, is responsible for his son's fear of women.

McCullers writes of Williams:

He had been brought up in a household exclusively male. From his father, who ran a one-mule farm and preached on Sunday at a Holiness church, he had learned that women carried in them a deadly and catching disease which made men blind, crippled, and doomed to hell. . . . Private Williams had never willingly touched, or looked at, or spoken to a female since he was eight years old. (p. 20)

The Private's attraction to Leonora eventually destroys most of his fear, but still he has spent his youth afflicted by an unnatural sexual attitude caused by the warped teachings of his father. Williams' upbringing undoubtedly combines with his limited mentality to produce his adult sexual aberration, voyeurism.

Captain Penderton also has been harmed emotionally by his family. His parents, for reasons not given, do not play a part in his life except through their absence. He is reared by five unhappy spinster aunts:

. . . they had used the little boy as a sort of fulcrum to lift the weight of their own heavy crosses. The Captain had never known real love. His aunts gushed over him with sentimental effulgence and knowing no better he repaid them with the same counterfeit coin. (p. 78)

The Captain, then, never learned to love. He quite probably came to resent his aunts and to transfer this resentment later to other women. His upbringing, therefore, as in the

case of Private Williams, is at least partially responsible for his adult deviations.

As is common in modern Gothic, the characters often retreat to sheltered rooms where they resort to daydreams in order to ease their unhappiness. Alison lies in her bedroom and dreams of running away with Anacleto to become a shrimp fisherman. She imagines that "she and Anacleto would stay out at sea all day with their nets lowered and there would be only the cold salt air, the ocean and the sun . . . ." (p. 49). Captain Penderton sits late at night in his quiet study and dreams of living the carefree life of an enlisted man:

In these phantasies he saw himself as a youth, . . . with a young, easy body that even the cheap uniform of a common soldier could not make ungraceful, with thick glossy hair and round eyes unshadowed by study and strain. . . . And the background of all this was the barracks: the hubbub of young male voices, the genial loafing in the sun, the irresponsible shenanigans of camaraderie. (p. 121)

Oliver Evans points out that "illusions, the author is saying are necessary to enable human beings to endure the reality of life."<sup>18</sup>

Life is indeed difficult for the characters of Reflections in a Golden Eye, for it must be faced along. As Louise Y. Gossett notes, the frustration that results

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<sup>18</sup> Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, pp. 70-71.

from isolation often "ignites violent reaction."<sup>19</sup> Alison's self-mutilation is a prime example. Another example of violence created by frustration and also by narcissism is the vicious beating that Captain Penderton administers to his wife's beautiful, spirited stallion, Firebird. Robert Rechnitz suggests that Firebird represents vitality and normal sensuality. In beating the horse, Penderton tries "to destroy that which he cannot have."<sup>20</sup> The Captain does succeed in destroying Private Williams, whom Rechnitz describes as "an innocent, almost mindless god of life."<sup>21</sup> Penderton discovers the Private in Leonora's room and shoots him. The Captain cannot bear the thought that the man who obsesses him cares for another. In killing Williams, however, the Captain realizes that he is ensuring his own destruction, for he is killing a vital part of himself.<sup>22</sup> The shooting, therefore, is a double act of violence. It is both an act of murder and an act of suicide.

Private Williams also commits acts of violence. Five years ago, "in an argument over a wheelbarrow of manure he had stabbed a Negro to death and hidden the body in an abandoned quarry" (p. 100). In the present, as his feelings

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<sup>19</sup>Gossett, Violence, p. 163.

<sup>20</sup>Robert M. Rechnitz, "The Failure of Love: The Grotesque in Two Novels by Carson McCullers," The Georgia Review, XXII (Winter, 1968), 458.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 457.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., p. 458.

for Leonora bring him partially out of his withdrawn state, he begins to start fights in his barracks. He needs a release for the new tensions inside him, and violence is the only outlet available. As Louise Y. Gossett points out, however, Williams does not understand his actions: "Entirely absorbed in sensation, he is incapable of naming to himself the violence in which he engages."<sup>23</sup>

Just as Williams is too mindless to understand his violence, he, Leonora, and Morris Langdon are too mindless even to understand that their lives are not normal. They are not basically unhappy and do not experience the modern Gothic sense of terror because they do not have the intelligence to realize that they lack the ability to love and to communicate in a healthy, complete manner. They are oblivious to their deprivation.<sup>24</sup>

Only Alison, Weldon Penderton, and, to a degree, Anacleto are capable of experiencing terror, for they alone are aware that they are trapped in a loveless world of loneliness and frustration.<sup>25</sup> They are indeed unable to overcome their aberrations and find love, for the only damaging fault over which the characters have any degree of control is their narcissism. Alison, Penderton, and

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<sup>23</sup>Gossett, Violence, p. 163.

<sup>24</sup>Rechnitz, "Failure of Love," p. 456.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

Anacleto sense that their unhappiness is primarily the creation of external forces. For example, McCullers writes of Captain Penderton:

Sometimes when he was by himself he was overcome by a rootless terror. And now, as he stood in the silent room, it seemed that his nervousness and distress were not caused by forces within himself and others, things that in some measure he could control--but by some menacing outward circumstance which he could only sense from a distance. (p. 55)

An awareness of helplessness, therefore, of being at the mercy of an inexplicable fate, brings terror to these unhappy people.<sup>26</sup>

In this novel, however, McCullers is unsuccessful in communicating the terror of her characters to the reader. McCullers intends her grotesques to be symbols of isolation, but she obscures their symbolic level by providing a psychological and sociological analysis of their behavior and by placing them in a setting made realistic by accurate descriptions of the mundane details of army life. The reader, therefore, has difficulty recognizing the characters as symbols, and their extreme aberrations prevent him from seeing them as real people. As a result, the reader may be tempted, as Oliver Evans points out, to view the characters with the same detachment that one might feel in

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

reading "mere case histories out of, say, Krafft-Ebing . . . ." <sup>27</sup> These depraved people simply do not excite the empathy necessary for the reader to pity them or to feel their terror, and since they are weak as symbols, the average reader may wonder, as many critics have done, just exactly what McCullers is trying to say.

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<sup>27</sup> Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 76.

## CHAPTER IV

### MODERN GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN THE BALLAD OF THE SAD CAFÉ

The small Southern town which serves as the setting for The Ballad of the Sad Café is "the merest of backdrops; the scene is Everywhere,"<sup>1</sup> for, as is common in modern Gothic, McCullers' setting functions as a microcosm, an epitome of a lonely, lovelorn world. The author describes the town as "lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places . . . ." <sup>2</sup> The main street is deserted, the only movement occurring in the window of an old boarded-up building:

. . . when the heat is at its worst a hand will slowly open the shutter and a face will look down on the town. It is a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams--sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief. (pp. 3-4)

The crazed face in the window belongs to Miss Amelia Evans and the crumbling old building once housed a thriving

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<sup>1</sup>Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York, 1965), p. 127.

<sup>2</sup>Carson McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Café, in The Ballad of the Sad Café and Other Stories, Bantam Books (New York, 1964), p. 3. All subsequent references to this novella will be to this edition and will be cited in this chapter by page number in parentheses following each quotation.

store and a gay café. The author unfolds the past of the store and of its proprietor in a tale which Albert J. Griffith describes as being "as grotesque in characterization and incident as anything in American literature."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in this novella, as in Reflections in a Golden Eye, the grotesque is the most immediately obvious modern Gothic element.

Miss Amelia is a giant, cross-eyed woman "with bones and muscles like a man" (p. 4). She carefully avoids social contact with others, devoting herself to running the store, to tending her moonshine still, to engaging in various other business endeavors, and to dispensing folk medicine. At the age of nineteen, she makes a radical departure from her solitary life style by marrying the handsome Marvin Macy, a notorious, evil man who "for years . . . had carried about with him the dried and salted ear of a man he had killed in a razor fight" (p. 27) and who in the past had spent much of his time seducing innocent young girls.

At the age of twenty-two, Macy surprisingly falls deeply in love with the peculiar Miss Amelia. Indeed, his love is so strong that during the two years before he proposes, he works diligently at improving his character:

He reformed himself completely. He was good to his brother and foster mother, and he saved his

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<sup>3</sup>Albert J. Griffith, "Carson McCullers' Myth of the Sad Café," The Georgia Review, XXI (Spring, 1967), 46.

wages and learned thrift. Moreover, he reached out toward God. . . . He learned good manners: he trained himself to rise and give his chair to a lady, and he quit swearing and fighting and using holy names in vain. (pp. 29-30)

The townspeople hope that love also will refine Miss Amelia's character, but they soon are disappointed. Miss Amelia continues her strange ways. She allows her groom to move into her house, but she refuses to consummate the marriage. Macy follows longingly after his bride as she goes about her work, but she ignores him. She sells the presents that he brings her, and finally, after he has signed all of his property over to her, she bars him from her home. The marriage has lasted only ten days.

After swearing revenge, Macy leaves town and returns to his evil ways. He robs stores and filling stations, and becomes a suspect in a murder case. Soon news reaches Miss Amelia that he has been sent to the Atlanta penitentiary. She is pleased and speaks of Macy with a "terrible and spiteful bitterness" (p. 33). Her delight at Macy's downfall is particularly strange, for "all that he had ever done was to make her richer and to bring her love" (p. 33).

Macy gradually fades from Miss Amelia's memory, and her life passes quietly until she becomes thirty years old. At that time Lymon Willis comes to town claiming to be Miss Amelia's cousin. Lymon is a ragged, tubercular, hunchbacked dwarf whose story of kinship is an obvious fabrication, but

Miss Amelia surprises her neighbors by taking him into her home. The townspeople are even more surprised when they realize that Miss Amelia, who rejected the handsome Marvin Macy, has fallen in love with the hideous hunchback.

Furthermore, Miss Amelia's love for Cousin Lymon does not involve a perverse sexual attraction, but exists solely on a pure, spiritual plane, "untainted by casual gratification or instinctive need."<sup>4</sup> The love, though considered strange and unaccountable by the townspeople, is so powerful that it effects a change in Miss Amelia as radical as the one experienced by Marvin Macy. Her personality mellows, and she is "not so quick to cheat her fellow man and to exact cruel payments" (p. 24) in her business dealings. She begins to socialize with the townspeople, and in order to provide company for the gregarious Cousin Lymon, she turns her store into a café that becomes "the only place of pleasure for many miles around" (p. 24).

Before Miss Amelia opened the café, the townspeople seldom attended social gatherings. Their lives were lonely and empty. The café changes all of this, for it provides "these qualities: fellowship, the satisfaction of the belly, and a certain gaiety and grace of behavior" (p. 23). As Oliver Evans points out, the café "serves . . . as a

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<sup>4</sup>Ihab H. Hassan, "Carson McCullers: The Alchemy of Love and Aesthetics of Pain," Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views, edited by Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston, 1962), p. 229.

refuge and a solace for the townspeople--a place of good cheer, it is a kind of bulwark against the impersonal and the inimical . . . ."5 The café, a product of Miss Amelia's love for Cousin Lymon, "is the symbol of the ability of human affection to create intimacy and delight where only barrenness existed before."6

However, as is common in modern Gothic, love provides only a temporary escape from loneliness. Marvin Macy returns to town and destroys "the happy love of Miss Amelia and the gaiety of the café" (p. 34). Cousin Lymon falls hopelessly in love with Macy, who accepts the hunchback as a companion primarily to torment Miss Amelia. The distraught Miss Amelia grows desperate. She even allows Cousin Lymon to move Macy into her home, for she fears that if she were to refuse to admit her former husband, the hunchback would leave her, and "once you have lived with another, it is a great torture to have to live alone" (p. 60).

Finally, however, the tensions created by the bizarre love triangle drive Miss Amelia and Macy to a violent solution. They begin elaborate training for a fight that is to have Cousin Lymon as its "unholy trophy."7 Most of the

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<sup>5</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 134.

<sup>6</sup>Lawrence Graver, Carson McCullers, University of Minnesota Pamphlets of American Writers, No. 84 (Minneapolis, 1969), p. 31.

<sup>7</sup>Hassan, "Carson McCullers," p. 228.

townspeople place their bets on Miss Amelia, and, indeed, when the fight occurs, her victory seems certain until Cousin Lymon deserts his spectator position and jumps onto her back, allowing Macy to win. Before the two men leave town early the next morning, they wreck the café and Miss Amelia's still.

Miss Amelia waits three years before giving up hope that the hunchback will return, and the loneliness and the longing of those years effect a pathetic change in the once strong and fearless woman:

Miss Amelia let her hair grow ragged, and it was turning gray. Her face lengthened, and the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy. And those gray eyes--slowly day by day they were more crossed, and it was as though they sought each other out to exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition. (p. 70)

Miss Amelia finally hires a carpenter to board up the café and then becomes the lonely recluse introduced at the beginning of the novella. The modern Gothic cycle of isolation, brief escape, and inevitable return to isolation is complete.

The failure of Miss Amelia's love also affects the townspeople. Their lives, too, become once again lonely and monotonous:

There is no good liquor to be bought in the town; the nearest still is eight miles away, and the liquor is such that those who drink it grow warts on their livers the size of goobers, and dream themselves into a dangerous inward world. There

is absolutely nothing to do in the town. Walk around the millpond, stand kicking a rotten stump, figure out what you can do with the old wagon wheel by the side of the road near the church. The soul rots with boredom. You might as well go down to the Forks Falls highway and listen to the chain gang. (p. 71)

McCullers describes the chain gang in an epilogue entitled "The Twelve Mortal Men." The twelve prisoners, chained together at the ankles, spend their day performing hard labor in the hot sun. Singing brings them a measure of relief:

One dark voice will start a phrase, half-sung, and like a question. And after a moment another voice will join in, soon the whole gang will be singing. The voices are dark in the golden glare, the music intricately blended, both somber and joyful. . . . It is music that causes the heart to broaden and the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright. Then slowly the music will sink down until at last there remains one lonely voice . . . . (p. 71)

The passage is a symbolic presentation of the modern Gothic theme of spiritual isolation. As Wayne D. Dodd points out, it "restates briefly and powerfully the central problem with which this novel deals . . . ; it also reveals the condition of the characters in the other novels . . . ." <sup>8</sup>

The men, paradoxically bound by that which separates them, loneliness, attempt to escape through love, which the singing symbolizes. <sup>9</sup> The escape, however, is only temporary, and in

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<sup>8</sup>Waynd D. Dodd, "The Development of Theme through Symbol in the Novels of Carson McCullers," The Georgia Review, XVII (Summer, 1963), 206.

<sup>9</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 133.

the end "there remains one lonely voice" (p. 71). The listener feels "ecstasy" (p. 71) when he recognizes the nobility of man's struggle to free himself from the chains of isolation,<sup>10</sup> but he feels "fright" (p. 71), or the modern Gothic sense of terror, when he senses the futility of the effort. The "half-sung" (p. 71) song of the chain gang extends the final symbolism of the café, half-painted by Cousin Lymon on the day of the fight: ". . . the world . . . is only partially finished, and there can be only incomplete unity and understanding . . . ." <sup>11</sup>

In The Ballad of the Sad Café, McCullers presents a discourse on love that bears extensive quoting, for in it she "clearly outlines her theory of love and isolation."<sup>12</sup> She writes:

First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons--but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved. There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries. Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which has lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. . . .

Now, the beloved can . . . be of any description. The most outlandish people can be the stimulus for love. . . . Therefore, the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself.

It is for this reason that most of us would rather love than be loved. Almost everyone wants

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<sup>10</sup>Dodd, "Development of Theme through Symbol," p. 212.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 211.

<sup>12</sup>Robert S. Phillips, "Painful Love: Carson McCullers' Parable," Southwest Review, LI (Winter, 1966), 85.

to be the lover. And the curt truth is that, in a deep secret way, the state of being beloved is intolerable to many. The beloved fears and hates the lover, and with the best of reasons. For the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved. (pp. 26-27)

McCullers is presenting the modern Gothic theory that narcissism is often the cause of love's failure. The lover strips the real personality from the beloved, substituting a false personality composed of qualities that the lover finds desirable and wishes to see in the love-object. The lover, then, does not cherish the beloved as a person in his own right, but as a reflection of the lover's desires. The love-object, who also often is a narcissist, resents "the imposition of an alien will"<sup>13</sup> and therefore "fears and hates the lover" (p. 27). Love, then, inevitably fails. McCullers uses the characters of The Ballad of the Sad Café as symbols in communicating her theory of love.<sup>14</sup> Their grotesqueness makes them valuable not only as symbols of isolation but also as illustrations of her thesis of narcissism that "outlandish people" (p. 26) may serve as love-objects because the lover, bent on creating an image of his own desires, ignores the actual personality of the object. As Oliver Evans points out, "the more outlandish the characters and the more incongruous the matches which

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<sup>13</sup>Dodd, "Development of Theme through Symbol," p. 212.

<sup>14</sup>Phillips, "Painful Love," p. 85.

they make . . . , the more eloquently they illustrate this thesis."<sup>15</sup>

The characters have obvious narcissistic tendencies. For example, Miss Amelia increases her wealth by ruthlessly foreclosing mortgages. McCullers writes that "the only use that Miss Amelia had for other people was to make money out of them" (p. 5). Marvin Macy heartlessly uses the young girls of the town to satisfy his sexual needs, and at the home of his foster mother, "he pushed the children of the household out of the way and served himself a big meal" (p. 51) although there was not enough food for everyone. Cousin Lymon "learns to exercise the hateful tyranny of a spoiled child."<sup>16</sup> Using Miss Amelia for protection, he amuses himself by precipitating fights and arguments among the townspeople. He demands and receives privileged treatment from Miss Amelia and from the customers in the café. Each character also, of course, shows himself to be self-serving by choosing a love-object so unlikely that the basis of attraction has to be the lover's projection of his own desires into the beloved. Each character, too,

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<sup>15</sup> Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 130.

<sup>16</sup> Graver, Carson McCullers, p. 31.

completes the narcissistic "circle of pursuing and fleeing lovers" by rejecting, often violently, his lover.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, in The Ballad of the Sad Café, the modern Gothic element of violence occurs most frequently as an expression of rejection by the beloved. Miss Amelia often strikes Marvin Macy during their short marriage: ". . . Miss Amelia hit him whenever he came within arm's reach of her, and whenever he was drunk" (pp. 32-33). Macy, in turn, hits and threatens Cousin Lymon when the dwarf demands too much attention: ". . . if the hunchback got in his way he would cuff him with the back of his hand, or say: 'Out of my way, Brokeback--I'll snatch you bald-headed'" (p. 57). Finally, of course, Cousin Lymon repays Miss Amelia's love by attacking her during her fight with Macy:

. . . at the instant Miss Amelia grasped the throat of Marvin Macy the hunchback sprang forward and sailed through the air as though he had grown hawk wings. He landed on the broad strong back of Miss Amelia and clutched at her neck with his clawed little fingers. (p. 68)

The family backgrounds in the novella at least partially explain some of the violence, the loneliness, and the narcissism. For example, Marvin Macy's parents beat him and finally abandoned him, causing him "to be bold and fearless and cruel," with a heart as "tough as the horns of

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<sup>17</sup>Louise Y. Gossett, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (Durham, 1965), p. 167.

Satan" (p. 29). Macy's childhood taught him that to survive, he must think only of himself, employing any means necessary to secure food, shelter, and a measure of comfort. The violence, the selfishness, and the criminality of his adult years are direct outgrowths of his "hard beginning" (p. 28). Miss Amelia was "raised motherless by her father who was a solitary man" (p. 14) and who greatly spoiled his only daughter. Miss Amelia adopted her father's lonely life style and continued into adulthood the selfishness that he had fostered in her. Also, Miss Amelia might have become more feminine and less "contrary in every single respect" (p. 14) if she had had a mother's refining influence. McCullers writes little about Cousin Lymon's family. His ties to his parents apparently were very weak, and he therefore exhibits the selfish, hardened character of one who, like Marvin Macy, was left to fend for himself.

The brief descriptions of the family lives of the characters are among the few realistic or sociological touches in the novella. As Robert S. Phillips points out, ". . . McCullers has presented in this book a caricature of the grotesque and the absurd--a deliberate exaggeration of malformations and perversions beyond belief."<sup>18</sup> The extreme grotesqueness of the characters, a quality that makes reader identification unlikely, is, however, not a

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<sup>18</sup>Phillips, "Painful Love," p. 85.

weakness in this novella as it is in Reflections in a Golden Eye. In the latter novel McCullers creates confusion by using a more conventional, analytical method of development that seems to invite the reader to think of her characters as realistic, while at the same time ascribing to them an unlikely superfluity of perversions intended, of course, to make them symbols of isolation. The distracting dubiety between realism and allegory is absent from The Ballad of the Sad Café. Oliver Evans notes that

now the tendency toward abstraction that is a condition of all allegory gained the upper hand, and it is clear from the very outset that in the Ballad, as in the best of Kafka, the characters are less interesting in their own right than they are as symbols . . . .<sup>19</sup>

McCullers carefully sets her three principals apart from the "mortals" (p. 14) of the town.<sup>20</sup> She describes Miss Amelia as being so different from the townspeople that she "plainly requires a special judgment" (p. 14). Cousin Lymon is the "type of person who has a quality about him that sets him apart from other and more ordinary human beings" (p. 20). Marvin Macy has "about him a secret meanness that clung to him almost like a smell. Another thing--he never sweated, not even in August, and that surely

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<sup>19</sup> Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 127.

<sup>20</sup> Griffith, "Carson McCullers' Myth," p. 47.

is a sign worth pondering over" (p. 52). The details in every case are odd, striking, and few in number.

In a further departure from realism, McCullers "includes certain touches of the supernatural."<sup>21</sup> For example, she suggests that Marvin Macy has "learned the method of laying charms" (p. 52). He brings "bad fortune" (p. 51) to the town, and he causes Cousin Lymon to be "possessed by an unnatural spirit" (p. 52). Even Miss Amelia's liquor possesses magical powers. After a man has drunk it, "he may suffer, or he may be spent with joy--but the experience has shown the truth; he has warmed his soul and seen the message hidden there" (p. 10). Also, various weird signs and portents occur in the novella. A dog's "wild, hoarse howl" (p. 6) signals Cousin Lymon's arrival in town, and on the day of the great fight, "a hawk with a bloody breast flew over the town and circled twice around the property of Miss Amelia" (p. 63).

The characters and events, then, of The Ballad of the Sad Café are deliberately unrealistic. Indeed, the tale, with its theme of "tragic thwarted love" and with its "omens, portents, and other expressions of the supernatural," resembles the "early literary form whence its name

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<sup>21</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 135.

derives."<sup>22</sup> The eerie, poetic narrative voice, the "singer"<sup>23</sup> of the Ballad, obviously invites the reader not to identify with the grotesque characters but to observe them. It seems to ask only that he experience a sense of terror by opening himself to the atmosphere of sadness and doom and by recognizing the unmistakable message that love inevitably fails, leaving man to loneliness and despair as fearsome as any Gothic monstrosity.

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<sup>22</sup>Dale Edmonds, Carson McCullers, Southern Writers Series, No. 6 (Austin, 1969), p. 21.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 20.

## CHAPTER V

### MODERN GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING

In The Member of the Wedding, McCullers uses another nameless Southern town as the setting for her story of a lonely, terror-filled summer in the life of twelve-year-old Frankie Addams. The novel is divided into three parts, each part describing a stage through which Frankie passes in her search for love and for communication. In each stage Frankie assumes a different name to mark a new period in her "spiritual odyssey."<sup>1</sup>

As is common in modern Gothic, the Frankie of Part One experiences terror that results from a feeling of being isolated from others: "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."<sup>2</sup> Her physical growth, in particular, frightens her:

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<sup>1</sup>Frank Baldanza, "Plato in Dixie," The Georgia Review, XII (Summer, 1958), 158.

<sup>2</sup>Carson McCullers, The Member of the Wedding, Bantam Pathfinder edition (New York, 1966), p. 1. All subsequent references to this novel will be to this edition and will be cited in this chapter by page number in parentheses following each quotation.

In the past year she had grown four inches. . . .  
If she reached her height on her eighteenth  
birthday, she had five and one-sixth growing years  
ahead of her. Therefore, . . . she would grow  
to be over nine feet tall. And what would be a  
lady who is over nine feet high? She would be a  
Freak. (pp. 16-17)

Frankie thinks of the unfortunates in the House of Freaks  
at the fair and imagines "that they had looked at her in a  
secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as  
though to say: we know you" (p. 18). Her height, therefore,  
makes her feel that she, too, is a freak.

Frankie becomes an outsider. She is too old to be a  
member of the world of children, but she is too young to  
participate in adult activities. She no longer can give  
shows or play beneath the scuppernong arbor with the  
neighborhood children, but the older girls say that she is  
too young to be admitted to their social club. Frankie  
confines herself to the kitchen of her home, where her only  
companions are her six-year-old cousin, John Henry West, and  
the middle-aged Negro cook, Berenice Sadie Brown. As  
Oliver Evans points out, "Berenice and John Henry represent  
the two worlds (of experience and innocence respectively)  
between which Frankie darts uncertainly back and forth,  
feeling at home in neither."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York,  
1965), p. 111.

Frankie, John Henry, and Berenice sit in the kitchen playing cards and "saying the same things over and over, so that by August the words began to rhyme with each other and sound strange" (p. 1). Frankie describes the kitchen as "a sad and ugly room" (p. 4). She hates it, but she has no other place to go. Oliver Evans suggests that "for kitchen, [one should] read world--a monotonous and sordid world from which there is no escape for most of us."<sup>4</sup>

Frankie's only means of escape is through dreams.<sup>5</sup> She dreams most often of living in Alaska, where her brother, Jarvis, is stationed at an army base. World War II is in progress, and Frankie dreams also of becoming a Marine or of giving blood for the soldiers. She imagines that "her blood would be in the veins of Australians and Fighting French and Chinese, all over the whole world, and it would be as though she were close kin to all of these people" (p. 21). Frankie's dreams, of course, are impossible. The Red Cross refuses to take her blood because she is too young, and she feels more isolated than before:

Frankie felt mad with the Red Cross, and left out of everything. The war and the world were too fast and big and strange. To think about the world for very long made her afraid. . . . She was afraid

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>5</sup>Ihab H. Hassan, "Carson McCullers: The Alchemy of Love and Aesthetics of Pain," Recent American Fiction: Some Critical Views, edited by Joseph J. Waldmeir (Boston, 1963), p. 225.

because in the war they would not include her, and because the world seemed somehow separate from herself. (p. 21)

As Frankie's dream of donating blood indicates, she "wishes to be joined . . . to something not only outside herself but also bigger than herself and more inclusive. She does not wish to be joined to a person but to that which joins all people--to the we of people."<sup>6</sup> Frankie experiences new hope that her desires will be realized when she learns that her brother is returning home to marry Janice Evans. She decides to become "a member of the wedding. The three of them would go into the world and they would always be together. And finally, after the scared spring and the crazy summer, she was no more afraid" (p. 43). As Charles B. Tinkham points out, "Frankie . . . has fallen in love not with another human being, but with a particular instance of attraction between two people which she almost instantaneously generalizes into a kind of universal love."<sup>7</sup>

In Part Two of the novel, Frankie becomes F. Jasmine, a name she chooses because it contains the letters Ja like the names of Janice and Jarvis.<sup>8</sup> F. Jasmine is not an

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<sup>6</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 107.

<sup>7</sup>Charles B. Tinkham, "The Members of the Side Show," The Phylon Quarterly, XVIII (Fall, 1958), 388.

<sup>8</sup>Dale Edmonds, Carson McCullers, Southern Writers Series, No. 6 (Austin, 1969), p. 25.

outsider like the old Frankie, "for in a new way she belonged. Because of the wedding, F. Jasmine felt connected with all she saw . . ." (p. 44). She walks through the town telling strangers about the wedding, and with these strangers, she feels "a new unnamable connection, as though they were known to each other . . ." (p. 51).

Unlike Frankie, who would "stop up both her ears" (p. 75) at the mention of love, F. Jasmine sits at the kitchen table on the day before the wedding and listens as Berenice, who is the "mouthpiece for Mrs. McCullers' theory of love,"<sup>9</sup> talks at length about the subject. Berenice tells F. Jasmine: "I have knew womens to love veritable Satans and thank Jesus when they put their split hooves over the threshold. I have knew boys to take it into their heads to fall in love with other boys" (pp. 75-76). As in The Ballad of the Sad Café, McCullers is saying that people can find happiness through love, no matter how strange or grotesque the object of their love may be,<sup>10</sup> for loving another brings an end to loneliness.<sup>11</sup>

Berenice, however, tells F. Jasmine that "falling in love with a wedding" (p. 77) is the strangest tale that she

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<sup>9</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 111.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 113.

<sup>11</sup>Robert S. Phillips, "The Gothic Architecture of The Member of the Wedding," Renascence, XVI (Winter, 1964), 70.

has ever heard and that the obsession is a foolish dream that will bring her unhappiness. Berenice, chiding F. Jasmine for changing her name, expresses the modern Gothic theory that all men are trapped in their isolation and that any attempt to escape will fail:

We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don't know why. But we caught anyhow. I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each one of us somehow caught all by ourself. (p. 113)

Berenice further points out that she, as a Negro, suffers a special isolation. She explains that "they done drawn completely extra bounds around all colored people. . . . So we caught that first way . . . , as all human beings is caught. And we caught as colored people also" (pp. 113-114).

Berenice relates that she found temporary relief from loneliness when she fell in love with Ludie Freeman, who became her first husband. Ludie, however, died; and Berenice, in an unsuccessful attempt to recapture her former happiness, married three other men who reminded her in some way of Ludie. The last three husbands had faults that caused her to divorce them. Berenice eventually begins to regret even her happiness with Ludie; for, as she tells F. Jasmine, "It spoils you too much. It leaves you too lonesome afterward. . . . And you take up with too many sorry men to try to get over the feeling" (p. 88). Berenice

feels her isolation the more keenly for once having escaped it,<sup>12</sup> and her experience teaches her to fear love.

Berenice's attempt to prevent F. Jasmine from "falling in love with a wedding" (p. 77), therefore, springs more from Berenice's fear of the passion that F. Jasmine feels than from a belief that the idea is ludicrous. Berenice perhaps sees a parallel between her own love for Ludie and F. Jasmine's love for the wedding.<sup>13</sup> She does not want F. Jasmine to experience the unhappiness and the increased sense of loneliness that occur when a great love fails. Berenice probably is thinking of her efforts to find a replacement for Ludie when she tells F. Jasmine "If you take a mania like this, it won't be the last time and of that you can be sure. So what will become of you? Will you be trying to break into weddings for the rest of your days? And what kind of life would that be" (p. 102)? Berenice suggests that F. Jasmine find "a nice little white beau" (p. 77), for she instinctively realizes that F. Jasmine, as has been pointed out, is in no danger of falling in love with a particular individual. Her passion is for the mystical concept of "universal love" that the wedding represents.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>Tinkham, "Members of the Side Show," p. 388.

F. Jasmine does find a beau, but not the safe, young beau that Berenice pictures. She chooses a soldier, not because he is attractive personally, but because she connects him with travel and with the "groups of loud, glad gangs that roamed around the streets together or walked with the grown girls" (p. 65). She soon becomes disillusioned with the soldier, for he takes her to the Blue Moon, a sordid café-hotel, and tries to make love to her. F. Jasmine, frightened and repulsed, hits him with a pitcher and runs home. The soldier's actions cause her to remember other incidents: her accidental discovery of two of her father's boarders having intercourse, comments made by some older girls about marriage, and a "sin" (p. 23) that she committed with Barney MacKean.

F. Jasmine, however, does not understand at this time the sexual nature of the incidents. She believes that the boarders were having a "fit" (p. 37) and that the girls were telling "nasty lies" (p. 11). She knows that she and Barney did something wrong, but she calls their act an "unknown [italics mine] sin" (p. 23). She thinks that the soldier is a "crazy man" (p. 131). She vaguely realizes that the events are somehow connected, but she finds the knowledge distasteful and attempts to repress it. She refuses to "let these separate glimpses fall together . . ." (p. 130). Oliver Evans points out that McCullers includes the soldier

episode in the novel "to dramatize the difference between the meaning which love has for him, who thinks of it exclusively in physical terms, and the meaning which it has for the young girl whose interest in it excludes whatever is not spiritual."<sup>15</sup>

At the end of Part Two, F. Jasmine dismisses the soldier from her mind and returns to her dream of joining the wedding. In Part Three, however, the dream is shattered when Jarvis and Janice depart for their honeymoon, leaving behind the sobbing F. Jasmine. She now begins to call herself Frances, a name she chooses to mark a third stage in her life. Frances returns to the fear and the loneliness of Part One: "She was back to the fear of the summertime, the old feelings that the world was separate from herself--and the failed wedding had quickened the fear to terror" (p. 148).

Frances's terror is increased when she suddenly realizes the meaning of the previously uncomprehended sexual incidents: ". . . these separate recollections fell together in the darkness of her mind . . . , so that in a flash there came in her an understanding" (p. 146). Frances's new knowledge leaves her "too scared to go into the world alone" (p. 146). The horrible death from

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<sup>15</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 105.

meningitis of the timid, gentle John Henry also brings terror to Frances. His dead body figures in her nightmares.

To escape her loneliness and her terror, Frances again turns to dreams. She imagines becoming "a great poet--or else the foremost authority on radar" (p. 150). Frances also finds a friend, Mary Littlejohn, with whom she plans to travel around the world. Bolstered by new dreams and by a new friend, Frances again becomes optimistic, and at the end of Part Three, she looks forward to moving to a new house in the suburbs and to enjoying a long and close relationship with Mary Littlejohn.

Frances's optimism has led some critics, as Oliver Evans points out, to believe that The Member of the Wedding "ends on a . . . 'positive' note and is generally more affirmative than the earlier novels."<sup>16</sup> Louise Y. Gossett, for example, writes that Frances finally achieves "a healthy measure of maturity."<sup>17</sup> Evans notes, however, that Frances merely is indulging once again in impossible, childish dreams.<sup>18</sup> Dale Edmonds writes that "Frances has found in Mary Littlejohn only another 'wedding'--an illusory

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 123

<sup>17</sup>Louise Y. Gossett, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction (Durham, 1965), p. 165.

<sup>18</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 123.

object with which to attempt a connection."<sup>19</sup> She appears to be setting herself up for further disillusionment. Her goals are consistently unrealistic, and she is likely, therefore, to spend most of her life being lonely and unhappy.

Berenice, too, seems destined for further loneliness and unhappiness. Frances and Mr. Addams are leaving her behind in their move to the suburbs, and Berenice, feeling left out and realizing that an important part of her life is at an end, decides that "she might as well marry T. T." (p. 149), a man that she cannot love. Oliver Evans writes that her decision is "a compromise we have been led not to expect of her."<sup>20</sup> On the contrary, the marriage is in keeping with Berenice's fear of love, for she would rather endure the loneliness of a marriage without love than risk re-experiencing the pain that passion has brought her. She finally has given up her search for another Ludie.<sup>21</sup> Unlike Frances, Berenice has learned that isolation is inescapable.

As is common in modern Gothic, the familial ties in The Member of the Wedding do not provide an escape from loneliness. Frankie's mother is dead, and her father is too busy to give his daughter much attention. He is unaware that she might need him, and therefore he seldom takes the

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<sup>19</sup>Edmonds, Carson McCullers, p. 28.

<sup>20</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 125.

<sup>21</sup>Edmonds, Carson McCullers, p. 28.

time even to listen to her. She reflects that "he did not take her seriously, so that her questions must be asked twice" (p. 133). McCullers presents Mr. Addams as one of the hazy, background parent-figures found often in modern Gothic. As Irving Malin points out, in this novel "parenthood is horrifyingly weak--it cannot destroy or create."<sup>22</sup>

The modern Gothic element of narcissism also is present in The Member of the Wedding, primarily in the character of Frankie, whose narcissism is made more obvious by its contrast with the unselfish, loving natures of Berenice and John Henry. Frankie is so preoccupied with herself and with her dreams that she has little room in her life for concern about other people. For example, when her Uncle Charles dies, she shows no emotion. She thinks, "Now he was dead. But that had nothing to do with the wedding . . ." (p. 60).

Frankie's treatment of Berenice, who has shown her love and kindness and who indeed has been a "substitute mother,"<sup>23</sup> also is indicative of her narcissism. On one occasion when Berenice teases her about the wedding, Frankie replies with unnecessary venom, "Some day you going to look down and find that big fat tongue of yours pulled out by the roots and laying there before you on the table" (p. 32). As Frankie

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<sup>22</sup>Irving Malin, New American Gothic, Crosscurrents Modern Critiques (Carbondale, 1962), p. 59.

<sup>23</sup>Tinkham, "Members of the Side Show," p. 387.

prepares to leave for the suburbs, her attitude toward Berenice becomes increasingly callous. Frankie cruelly says that Berenice is incapable of appreciating Mary Littlejohn. Frankie "had said that before to Berenice, and from the faded stillness in her eye she knew that the words had hurt" (p. 151). Frankie, her mind filled with new dreams, has no regard for Berenice's feelings and shows no concern that the woman who raised her is being left behind. She also quickly forgets John Henry,<sup>24</sup> who many times had denied himself the pleasure of playing with his friends to comfort Frankie when she was lonely. She has two nightmares about his death and then dismisses him as she turns her thoughts to her plans with Mary Littlejohn.

Violence also occurs in the novel. In describing the disastrous consequences of Berenice's search for another Ludie, McCullers relates that Berenice's last husband gouged out her eye. To produce terror, McCullers includes an account of a young Negro boy's murder. Her language is chilling: "On an April afternoon his throat was slashed with a razor blade . . . , and later it was said his cut throat opened like a crazy shivering mouth that spoke ghost words into the April sun" (p. 87).

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<sup>24</sup>Lawrence Graver, Carson McCullers, University of Minnesota Pamphlets of American Writers, No. 84 (Minneapolis, 1969), p. 41.

McCullers frequently has Frankie contemplate, threaten, or engage in violence when her personal goals or beliefs are thwarted or endangered. For example, Frankie threatens Berenice with a knife when the Negro cook's irreverent teasing intrudes on her dreams of the wedding. After the failure of the wedding, Frankie holds a pistol to her head and thinks of suicide. She does not pull the trigger because she fears the "terrible blackness" (p. 144) of death more than she fears loneliness. Frankie hits the soldier and wants to kill Barney MacKean because they and the incidents in which they figure pose a threat to her idealized vision of human relationships, a vision which, as Oliver Evans has pointed out, does not include sexuality.<sup>25</sup>

The modern Gothic element of the grotesque also is present. In describing strange love affairs, Berenice mentions the relationship between a man named Juney Jones and a pathetic male homosexual, Lily Mae Jenkins, who tries to dress and to act like a woman. McCullers presents a detailed description of the carnival freaks with whom Frankie feels connected by her height. The author obviously intends the freaks to be symbols of loneliness, for she has Frankie say of them: "I doubt if they ever get married or go to a wedding" (p. 18).

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<sup>25</sup> Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 105.

Frankie describes another symbol of isolation, Honey Brown, Berenice's mentally disturbed foster brother, as a "sick-loose person" (p. 35). Honey's superior intelligence, light skin, and cultural interests set him apart from his companions. As his loneliness increases, his behavior becomes more erratic: ". . . he would suddenly run hog-wild all over Sugarville and tear around for several days, until his friends would bring him home more dead than living" (p. 122).

Berenice, too, becomes somewhat grotesque when she replaces her lost eye with an artificial one of bright blue glass, which "stared out fixed and wild from her quiet, colored face . . . ." (p. 3). Lawrence Graver writes that Berenice's choice of a blue eye "symbolizes her powerful desire to break free from the fated conditions of her birth and social position."<sup>26</sup> Graver's contention is supported by Berenice's description of a perfect world as one in which "there would be no separate colored people . . . , but all human beings would be light brown color with blue eyes . . . ." (p. 91).

Although the grotesque certainly exists in The Member of the Wedding, it does not figure so prominently as it does in McCullers' other novels. Oliver Evans suggests a reason for this lack of prominence. He points out that

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<sup>26</sup>Graver, Carson McCullers, p. 36.

McCullers employs grotesque characters primarily to symbolize loneliness. In The Member of the Wedding, McCullers has no need to make her protagonist grotesque, for Frankie's age implies isolation. An adolescent "is no longer a child nor yet an adult. . . . Adolescents do not belong anywhere, and thus constitute excellent symbols of spiritual loneliness."<sup>27</sup>

Since adolescence is a "socially acceptable badge of isolation," readers can identify more easily with Frankie than with the hunchbacks and the homosexuals of McCullers' other works,<sup>28</sup> and Frankie's terror and loneliness, therefore, are conveyed more effectively. The Member of the Wedding, then, is perhaps McCullers' most widely accepted novel, for the author accomplishes her purpose of portraying isolation without exciting the indignation or the distaste of readers and of critics who are offended by emphasis upon the grotesque.

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<sup>27</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 102.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

In the four works considered in this study, Carson McCullers is consistent enough in her handling of the modern Gothic that a brief, general description of her method is possible. First of all, her constant theme is spiritual isolation, the loneliness of man. In portraying her theme she often employs grotesque characters. The physical freak and the psychological deviate provide excellent symbols of estrangement,<sup>1</sup> hence McCullers' use of hunchbacks, mutes, homosexuals, and other misfits. There are few grotesque characters in The Member of the Wedding, but in that novel McCullers' heroine is an adolescent whose very age makes her a symbol of separateness. She belongs neither to the world of children nor to the world of adults.<sup>2</sup>

McCullers has her characters attempt to escape their loneliness either by loving another or by trying to establish communication with others and to find understanding. Communication, McCullers seems to say, is the most difficult

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<sup>1</sup>Robert S. Phillips, "The Gothic Architecture of The Member of the Wedding," Renascence, XVI (Winter, 1964), 60.

<sup>2</sup>Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York, 1965), p. 102.

method, for only one of her characters, Alison Langdon, truly succeeds. There must be mutual understanding for communication to take place. Love, however, need not be reciprocal to provide at least a temporary escape from loneliness.<sup>3</sup> Alison Langdon of Reflections in a Golden Eye has an intellectually satisfying relationship with Lieutenant Weincheck. She knows, however, that the relationship will end, for Weincheck is to leave the army post. In McCullers' world, the return to loneliness is inevitable. Alison's husband finds brief happiness with Leonora Penderton, but they are so limited mentally that their relationship is primarily sexual. McCullers' concern is with spiritual communication. The two most obvious examples of characters who seek but fail to find understanding are Jake Blount and Benedict Copeland of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. They fruitlessly devote their entire lives to achieving communication with others.

Characters more frequently escape through love; but love fails, and the escape, again, is only temporary. Often, the characters feel their isolation the more strongly for having escaped it.<sup>4</sup> Temporary love, then, can be a destructive experience, as it was for John Singer in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter or for Miss Amelia in The Ballad of

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

<sup>4</sup>Phillips, "Gothic Architecture," p. 70.

the Sad Café. At times, love fails because the love-object is cruelly removed by an inexplicable fate, as in the relationship of Berenice and Ludie in The Member of the Wedding and of John Singer and Antonapoulos in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter.

More often, love fails because the lover perversely chooses a love-object so unlikely that the chance for a reciprocal relationship is minimal, if not impossible. Here, McCullers' theory of narcissism enters. She views man as often confined to loneliness by his basic self-love. He cares little for the actual personality of his love-object; he is interested only in creating an image of his own desires and values. Thus, to illustrate her thesis, McCullers has her characters choose love-objects so strange that the only possible basis of attraction has to be this projection of the lover's needs into the object. The beloved either misunderstands the lover's intentions or is completely oblivious to them.<sup>5</sup>

Examples would be Captain Penderton's love for Private Williams in Reflections in a Golden Eye and Biff Brannon's love for Mick Kelly in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Even Frankie in The Member of the Wedding fits the pattern. She seeks to join herself not to one person, but two people, to the marriage of Jarvis and Janice. The wedding, therefore,

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

is a kind of love-object, and Frankie indeed attempts to project her own desires into it by changing it into a symbol of universal love in which she will be included.<sup>6</sup>

In The Ballad of the Sad Café, McCullers develops her theory more fully. The beloved, who also is a narcissist, now secretly understands the selfish intentions of the lover and "fears and hates"<sup>7</sup> him as a threat to the object's insular world. The only example in McCullers' world of an unselfish, lastingly successful love is that of Portia and Highboy, two minor characters in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Their relationship, by contrast, underscores the unhappiness of the other characters.<sup>8</sup>

Narcissism also causes much of the violence in McCullers' works. In The Ballad of the Sad Café, of course, the love-objects violently reject the lovers who are trying to possess them and to change them. In Reflections in a Golden Eye, Captain Penderton murders Private Williams because the Private cares for another. In The Member of the Wedding, Frankie hits the soldier because his gross, sexual advances threaten her idealized vision of life. As a final

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<sup>6</sup>Charles B. Tinkham, "The Members of the Side Show," The Phylon Quarterly, XVIII (Fall, 1958), 388.

<sup>7</sup>Carson McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Café, in The Ballad of the Sad Café and Other Stories, Bantam Books (New York, 1964), p. 27.

<sup>8</sup>Evans, Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 54.

example, in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, the beating of Dr. Copeland by the white deputies expresses narcissistic racism.

Violence in McCullers' works at times occurs seemingly without cause. Examples would be the grisly murder of the young Negro in The Member of the Wedding and Bubber's shooting of Baby in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. The inexplicable violence, like the sometimes mysterious failure of love, emphasizes McCullers' vision of an uncontrollable malevolent fate. Even if man were not selfish, this evil in the world would work to keep him unhappy and lonely.

McCullers' characters cannot find relief even in family ties. At times, the parents are basically well-meaning, but so preoccupied that they have little time to devote to understanding or to helping their offspring. Examples would be Mick Kelly's parents and Frankie Addams' father. Often the parent is dead or absent, as are John Singer's parents, Frankie Addams' mother, Miss Amelia's mother, and Captain Penderton's parents. Frequently, the family ties are severely destructive, as they are for Private Williams, Marvin Macy, and Biff Brannon. Truly happy, constructive family relationships are not to be found in McCullers' novels.

Since the unhappy characters cannot find relief through love, through communication, or in family ties, they

frequently daydream in an attempt to make life more bearable. The dreams are usually farfetched, like Mick Kelly's dream of living in foreign countries and of becoming a famous composer, or Alison Langdon's dream of running away with Anacleto to become a prawn fisherman. The frequency of daydreams in McCullers' works emphasizes the plight of her characters, lonely people to whom reality offers little happiness. Indeed, the only work in which daydreaming does not occur is The Ballad of the Sad Café, but then the deliberately unrealistic characters of this novella are not given to the practices of more ordinary people. Also, in keeping with the ballad motif, McCullers does not explore their inner lives as fully as she does those of her other characters.

Most of the characters know that their extravagant dreams will never be realized. Frankie Addams still believes in her dreams, but the reader knows that they are impossible. The characters' knowledge that they are hopelessly trapped in their isolation and in their unhappiness, brings them terror. It is this terror that McCullers attempts to convey to the reader, "the terror which comes from the knowledge that one is alone in an indifferent or hostile universe."<sup>9</sup> McCullers uses the elements of modern Gothic; grotesque characters, narcissism, the failure of

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<sup>9</sup>Phillips, "Gothic Architecture," p. 61.

love and of communication, violence, fruitless dreams, and ineffective or destructive family ties, to present her vision of a lonely, terror-filled world that offers no hope of escape.

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