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# **Adolescent Girls and the Alternative Self: Exploring Liminality and the Father in Carson McCullers**

**Treball de Fi de Grau**

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## Abstract

Carson McCullers' fiction explores the spiritual isolation of the marginalised in the deep South. More concretely, in her debut novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and in *The Member of the Wedding* she questions the ideals of femininity in the twentieth century through the two young protagonists, Mick and Frankie, who are in a liminal stage of their lives, not only in age but also in their identity and sexuality. The way in which McCullers questions matters of gender and feminism in her novels has been in the critics' spotlight in the later years. Most critics have studied McCullers in terms of feminism, identity and race. For instance, Sarah Gleeson-White offers a description of how McCullers juxtaposes gender and identity by means of revaluating the grotesque and its function in the narration. Other critical works have focused on her concern for racial politics or gender oppression. Rachel Adam's article puts forward the queer and freakish nature of the two protagonists and how their loneliness is marked by their human condition, as their corporeal anomalies challenge all social conventions. However, critics have not yet fully considered a very important aspect of the two narrations; the role of the family, and more concretely, the role of the father, as a key to understanding the nature of these two novels. The protagonists' perplexity about their identity could be, in fact, a result of the lack of a solid paternal relationship, which accentuates their alienation and makes them aim for an alternative self. Therefore, this essay seeks to make a deeper analysis on the way in which liminality is treated in these two works by means of offering a new perspective on how familiar and parental relationships, or the lack of such, affect Mick and Frankie's development towards maturity. The aim of this essay is to explain to what extent their alienation is determined by the absence of the language of the father and whether or not the search for a parental figure is one of the key elements to understand the nature of the two narrations. In this essay I also consider how the lack of a strong familiar nucleus accentuates the two tomboy's loneliness. Furthermore, I take into consideration the way in which both Mick and Frankie find ways to reach emotional fulfilment; Mick through music and Frankie through the wedding. Finally, I focus on the discourse of the symbolic foils that, being an expression of their own exclusion in society, actually work to fulfil the protagonists' expectations for parental figures.

## **I. Introduction**

Carson McCullers' fiction explores the spiritual isolation of the marginalised in the deep South. The way in which McCullers questions matters of identity, race and gender politics in her novels has been in the critics' spotlight in the later years. On the one hand, McCullers is often regarded as a radical representative author of the grotesque, or more specifically, the southern gothic. The depiction of strange, lonely and freakish characters is very common in her novels. It has been argued that 'to McCullers, the grotesque provides the most suitable medium in which to portray an alienated and tragic world consisting of characters who exemplify physical as well as psychological grotesqueness.' (Preeti Singh and Mahesh Kumar 2013: 159) Therefore, McCullers' characters suffer not only from psychological disabilities but also physical deformities. Sarah Gleeson White, in fact, claims that 'McCullers' fiction embraces so-called grotesques: a dwarf and a giant; tomboys, cross-dressers, and homosexuals; deaf-mutes and cripples. It is this collection of outsiders –physical and psychological misfits- that invites the classification of McCullers as a writer of the southern grotesque.' (2)

On the other hand, McCullers' work has also been of much interest in feminist studies because of her challenge to the ideals of womanhood as well as the representation of freakishness in her alienated female characters. More concretely, in her debut novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and in *The Member of the Wedding* she criticises the ideals of femininity in the twentieth century through the two young protagonists, Mick and Frankie, who are in a liminal stage of their lives, not only in age but also in their identity and sexuality. These two novels have some features in common. *The Member of the Wedding* deals with the psychology of the protagonist Frankie, a twelve-year-old tomboy who is in the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Her growing awareness of her not only sexual but also emotional identity

serves as a significant marker for her personal growth. The novel, located in the South, starts with the description of her inconformity for not belonging to any club or, in other words, to not feeling part of any social group. Her loneliness and anger contribute to create a character that feels completely disconnected from the world around her and who has a very peculiar personality for a twelve-year-old girl. However, her brother's wedding that is taking place that Sunday, awakens in her a feeling of potential emotional fulfilment, as she feels that she is finally going to become part of something and that people will start looking at her as a grown woman. This makes her become obsessed about the event and, even though this obsession is very significant in the first parts of the book, later on it takes a minor role and actually shows Frankie's personal development and understanding of complex themes such as love, sex or death. In the case of Mick in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, her story is placed among the other protagonists' narrations, even though hers occupies a bigger part of the novel and it is often argued that she is the actual protagonist of the narration. Mick is also a tomboy whose transition towards womanhood marks her personality in the novel. In her case, she comes from a bigger family and she finds an emotional escape from reality in music. Mick dreams of becoming a pianist and finds in music a source of energy and spiritual freedom. Throughout the novel her attachment to music becomes more and more crucial to her not only physical but also spiritual and emotional development. At some points, this strong attachment also brings her frustration and disappointment. According to Rachel Adam, '*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* represents a process of resistance to our tragic human existential dilemma, in which the character challenge the look by attempting, and failing, to determine their own visible identity in the world.'

(115) In fact, this is one of the shared features of the two novels since both of them deal

with the girls' development towards maturity, which also consists in understanding and building their own identity.

Most of the previous critical works have considered the relevance of McCullers' work in the existent debate about feminism and freakishness. Rachel Adam, for instance, puts forward the queer and freakish nature of the two protagonists and how their loneliness is marked by their female human condition, as their corporeal anomalies challenge all social conventions. The critic points out that 'many of McCullers's female characters, in particular, are characterized by a bodily excess that obstructs their ability to perform the roles expected of them or to successfully don the required accoutrements of femininity.' (23)

Nevertheless, previous studies have not taken into full consideration the protagonists' familiar relationships as a possible reason for their loneliness. It is obvious that Mick and Frankie have severe identity and gender struggles, yet it is not so easy to understand the nature of these. In this essay I argue that their perplexity about identity is determined by the lack of a solid parental relationship, which accentuates their alienation and makes them aim for an alternative self. Hence, the aim of this essay is to offer a new perspective of how familial relationships, and more specifically, the authoritative language of the father, affect Mick and Frankie's personality and behaviour. In this paper I talk about why there could be a relationship between the protagonists' alienation and the absence of a father figure in the novels. I aim to explore Mick and Frankie's search of a language of the father and to explain in what ways this is really a key element to understanding the nature of the two narrations. Furthermore, I focus not only on the absence of the father but also on the role of other family members such as Frankie's brother in *The Member of the Wedding* and Mick's mum in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. I analyse how the lack of a strong familiar nucleus and the



protagonists' symbolic orphanhood accentuate their loneliness. Also, I take into consideration the alternative ways through which they find emotional fulfilment. Frankie through the wedding and Mick through music, the two girls seek for something they can feel part of. Thus, I explore how these attachments help them achieve such fulfilment. Finally, I examine the discourse of symbolic foils in the two novels. It is essential to comprehend the role of the symbolic foils in the narration, as even though they are an expression of their own exclusion in society, they actually work to fulfil the protagonists' expectations for parental figures. The deaf-mute and Berenice are the two substitutes that have a strong impact on the protagonists' development and growth. Further, I question whether their presence is determined by their own desire of being an alternative father, or whether the protagonists really seek for such figures.

## **II. The search of the authoritative language of the father**

In this chapter I am going to focus on the relationship between the protagonists' alienation and the absence of the father figure. I am going to explore the protagonists' search for the authoritative language of the father as a source of their loneliness.

Mick and Frankie's development towards adulthood, their gender struggles and their identity issues are some of the most important aspects of these two narratives. They face a clear absence of a family structure and the search for a social group which they can feel part of is one of the key elements to understand their attitudes and behaviour. Not only the protagonists' personal growth takes place in these novels, but there is also a crucial factor that affects the journey of these characters, which have a strong feeling of alienation from the world around them: their gender struggles. Sarah Gleeson-White argues that 'both Mick and Frankie [...] reject the models of femininity

before them at the start of their respective stories.’ (88) Later I will explain why this is partly a result of the lack of a successful paternal relationship, which makes them aim for an alternative self.

## **II.I. Femininity and gender struggles**

To begin with, it is worth mentioning that Frankie and Mick fail any attempt to fit into the model of femininity. McCullers’s female protagonists identify themselves as freaks due to their inability to perform expected gender roles, not only because of their personality but also because of their physical appearance. As Rachel Adams claims, ‘many of McCullers’s female characters, in particular, are characterized by a bodily excess that obstructs their ability to perform the roles expected of them or to successfully don the required accoutrements of femininity.’ (558) The protagonists’ physical descriptions in the novels show the reader an alternative version of the traditional adolescent girl. Frankie is presented as an almost physically deformed freak: ‘this summer she was grown so tall that she was almost a big freak, and her shoulders were narrow, her legs too long. She wore a pair of blue track shorts, a B.V.D. undervest, and she was barefooted.’’(*The Member of the Wedding*: 4). Mick’s depiction is, in fact, very similar: ‘a gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve, stood looking in the doorway. She was dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes – so at first glance she was like a very young boy.’ (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 20)

The two protagonists have a sense of disconnection from the world around them and they feel a need to escape from their own lives ‘‘I wish I was somebody else except me.’’ (*The Member of the Wedding*; 5) Their inconformity with their body changes, their lack of knowledge about sex and relationships and, in many cases, their failure to communicate are only some of the consequences of the remoteness of any parental love and support. Part of their alienation is determined by the fact that they do not have any role model to look up to.

Mick and Frankie are alternative figures that break the boundaries of social structures; they break with the stereotype and with the roles defined for women. They remind us a lot of each other because of the manly behaviour they both adopt in the novels. Their coming-of-age and development towards womanhood collide with their actual desire to belong to a different gender and they seem to run away from any traditional discourse. Their feeling of alienation and their confusion about their gender identity are strongly interrelated. Their feeling of alienation is also determined by the fact that they are aware of their condition; they know they do not fit into the model of femininity, and this makes them feel separated from the people around them. In *The Hunter* we notice that Mick constantly feels overwhelmed as she thinks about the idea of being around too many people. In chapter 3 this becomes evident when she explains to her little brothers a dream that she has had:

‘It’s like I’m swimming. But instead of water I’m pushing out my arms and swimming through great big crowds of people. [...] And sometimes I’m yelling and swimming through people, knocking them all down wherever I go. [...] I guess it’s more like a nightmare than a plain dream’ (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 38-39)

Here we see how the mere idea of being around people makes Mick feel anxious. Mick and Frankie’s social confinement is also a consequence of their own perception of themselves as different. Mick is aware she does not dress like her other sisters do. Whenever they make fun of her she replies proudly about her awareness of not being like them: ‘I don’t want to be like either of you and I don’t want to look like either of you. And I won’t.’ (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 41) She claims that she even likes wearing shorts and admits she would ‘rather be a boy any day.’ (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 41)

Furthermore, Mick makes reference to her personal duality in terms of an outside versus an inside room. According to Clarie Lenviel; ‘This notion of an inside existence opposite an outside existence reflects the dichotomy of the being-for-others (the exterior Self made visible by the look) and the inner Self from which the being-for-others escapes.’ (116) Mick acknowledges the fact that her personality is somehow divided into two

different beings. It is only in the inside room where she is able to be herself, to dress like a boy if she wants to, or to explore her passion for music. In Frankie's case, it has been argued that she feels like a prisoner in her own body because of her tomboy personality. The critic Anna Young explores captivity and escape in Carson McCullers's protagonists. She claims that:

The fact that Frankie identifies with these criminals points to her own feelings of guilt and shame. In her own mind, she is not an innocent captive yet is being punished for a crime. We know that Frankie has shoplifted during the summer, but this seems an unconvincing explanation. Instead, one suspects that Frankie's real crime is her nonconformity, particularly her gender nonconformity. While her tomboy gender presentation has been acceptable during childhood, adolescence seems to have brought with it the pressure of feminization. (82)

According to this view, Frankie feels that she does not belong to any social group because she is not fulfilling the expectations of an adolescent girl. She feels guilty for that, and she believes she is a prisoner of her own gender condition. Furthermore, Young also points out Frankie's preoccupation for the unstoppable growth that her body is carrying out. As in any adolescent girl, the body changes at this stage become obvious and can be quite shocking when they start. Young argues that:

Accordingly, Frankie links the amount of space she takes up in the world with her ability to conform to the feminine ideal. Her anxieties regarding her body are complex. On the one hand, her body is too big and too unruly to allow her to fit in anywhere. On the other, she feels trapped inside her female body. Like the world as a whole, her body is at once frighteningly large and unpredictable but, at the same time, claustrophobically small and limiting. (3)

Frankie is thus comparing her own body to the physical world in which she lives; not only does she feel imprisoned in a society where she does not belong, but she also feels physically trapped in her own body, which is constantly transforming and growing. Chad M. Jewett also describes Frankie's body changes as a process of transformation that confines her: 'it's half-male, half-female appearance is a direct reflection of the trapped feeling with which Frankie struggles, as if the Freak is caught halfway through the very gender transformation that Frankie describes as a part of her Heaven and pines for as a

solution to her discomfort with gender structures.’(101) Such transition becomes even more difficult when the protagonists have to face it alone. If they had had the support and moral education of their parents, their confusion about such changes could have been understood and accepted in a different way.

The absence of the two mother figures is crucial in the two narratives. In the case of *The Member*, the mother died when Frankie was born, so her absence is both emotional and physical. In *The Hunter*, the mother is actually in the Kelly family yet she takes a minor role and her contributions are insignificant. Mrs Kelly plays a largely irrelevant role in the narrative, as she remains useless not only as a model of femininity but also as a maternal figure. Therefore, the relationship of the two adolescent girls with their fathers becomes the essential factor so as to understand the two protagonist’s feelings and personal development. Mick and Frankie’s inability to understand what their bodies are going through is nothing but a result of the absence of the language of a father, who has failed to listen and educate his children. This is going to be further explored in the next subchapter.

## **II.II The protagonists’ liminality and the influence of the father**

The relationship of the protagonists with a father who is almost absent, accentuates their loneliness and creates in them a frustrated desire for a stable familiar structure. They find themselves in a liminal stage of their lives; they feel afraid and they are in need of some kind of ethical and moral education. The process of reaching adulthood of any adolescent is marked by the influence of a paternal figure that works as an example to follow and provides with a family model which they can feel part of. However, the semi-orphaned protagonists present an emotional emptiness that, without the father figure, is very hard to fulfil.

Even though in both cases at least one of the parents is vaguely present in the story, Frankie and Mick are symbolically orphans. Still, they show an image of strong

independent teenagers. In Frankie's case the death of her mother left her without a model of femininity. However, it is her father who, having the possibility to act as an authoritative voice and an example to follow, simply ignores any opportunity to help his daughter in such a determining moment of any adolescent's life. Namely, the moment when Frankie is told that her uncle has died, she tries to impress her dad with some pretentious comments about the adult world. Her father reacts indifferently to this comment instead of trying to educate his daughter and explain to her why what she says does not make sense:

There was something more she ought to say about the death of Uncle Charles. When her father returned to the front of the store, she said: "At one time Uncle Charles was one of the leading citizens. It will be a loss to the whole country." The words did not seem to impress her father. "You had better go on home. Berenice has been phoning to locate you." (*The Member of the Wedding*; 69)

Here we see an attempt of the protagonist to get some attention from her dad and what she gets as a response is simply impassiveness.

It is worth noticing that the jewellery store has a strong symbolic meaning in the novel. Mr Addams is usually working in the store and does not take care of his child and, instead, he entrusts Berenice with all these duties, almost forgetting he is a father. He is not implicated in the education of his daughter as a good father should be, and prefers to stay away from home as much as he can. The store works as an emotional hiding place for Mr Addams, where he spends most of his time as if running away from his real duties as a head of a family. Thus, Frankie and her dad are separated not only in terms of emotional distance but also symbolically and physically in space. On the one hand, Frankie belongs to the kitchen with Berenice and John. Anna Young, in fact, points out that 'if Frankie is indeed a criminal, then her jail cell is the family kitchen where she has spent the summer with her cousin, John Henry, and the family's African American cook, Berenice. The vast majority of the dialogue in the novel takes place in the kitchen, and it is a room that Frankie can no longer stand. The narration clearly links the ugliness of the physical space with its emotional effect on Frankie.' (83) On the other hand, Mr Addams stays away from the

domestic atmosphere, keeping himself occupied working in the store. He voluntarily runs away from the role of father.

The situation in the Kelly family is quite different. Mick's father considers himself a failure as a head of family due to his inability to contribute financially at home. However, the biggest difference between the two father figures is that Mr Kelly's failure is not voluntary as in Mr Addams' case. His injury prevented him from working as a carpenter, which is the main cause of his own feeling of uselessness. He hardly works after that, and this makes him feel incompetent and even ignored by his family. Hence, the case here is the reverse of Frankie's: it is Mr Kelly who tries to get Mick's attention by starting trivial conversations without really having anything to tell her. His contributions do not have any relevance for Mick's moral education, they are just an excuse to have someone listening to him and his discourse is worthless to Mick.

There was one time when Mick 'suddenly realized about her Dad' (90). Mick first mentioned that she had always listened to her dad, even though her mind was always somewhere else. However, that one time she gets to see her dad's real feelings, she finally understands why he always calls her to talk. Mick realizes her dad's loneliness and feeling of guilt for not being a good head of family. This clearly shows Mick's growing maturity, which provides her with sensitivity and sympathy towards her loved ones. She then decides to stay and listen to him, which makes Mr Kelly feel happy for a moment. However, her dad's comments usually revolve around money; 'He talked about accounts and expenses and how things would have been if he had just managed in a different way.' (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 92) Their relationship is somehow contaminated by Mr Kelly's economic status, as this is his main worry. Even when he has an opportunity to talk to his child about more transcendental matters, he spends the time complaining about how his life would have been if he had not had that injury and could have worked more.

Another important aspect of their relationship is that it is not reciprocal; even when he reveals to her all his worries and feelings, she does not feel comfortable enough to tell him about hers; ‘for some reason she couldn’t tell him about the things in her mind – about the hot, dark nights.’ (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 92) Hence, despite his attempts to establish a good relationship with her daughter, the superficiality of his discourse does not allow her to be herself with him. Instead, Mick usually confesses herself to Mr Singer.

Nonetheless, both girls admire their dads in one way or another. Contrarily to Frankie’s case, in *The Heart* it is Mr Kelly who, even though unsuccessfully, seeks to have a closer relationship with her daughter. Despite the differences of these two relationships, in both cases the father does not offer any significant authority to influence the characters’ moral education and coming-of-age. The two girls do not learn from their fathers, they are not relevant figures in their personal growth, and their contributions do not help fight their spiritual and emotional isolation. The insensibility of Mr Addams and the inability of Mr Kelly to emotionally engage with her daughter actually accentuate the two girls’ lonesomeness and disaffection. The lack of such an essential influence leaves the two adolescents alone in the intricate experience that is learning, growing and maturing.

### **III. Alternative sources of emotional fulfilment**

In this chapter I am going to explore the alternative ways through which the two protagonists try to reach emotional fulfilment. As mentioned, the lack of a stable familiar nucleus leaves the two protagonists with a deep emotional emptiness. They feel that they are not a part of their own family and, even in their own house, they feel uncomfortable and lonely. Not only do they feel lonesome in their own home, but they also feel alienated from society because they do not feel accepted. Mick and Frankie have struggles trying to fit in,



as they are in desperate need for some kind of unity. Edward Richard Barkowsky explores the two protagonists' spiritual isolation. He argues;

To belong to a group or to have a close friend, in the adolescent viewpoint, is to be secure in the knowledge that one is accepted and understood by others. Conversely, to the adolescent that Mrs. McCullers creates, being left out can only mean that one is doomed to endure loneliness as the unfortunate, grotesque creatures in a carnival side-show must endure a solitary life. (9)

Mick and Frankie lack all kinds of relationships, so they unconsciously find alternative ways to fulfil such needs. On the one hand, Frankie Addams encounters a big event that makes her feel that she finally belongs to a group, her brother's wedding. On the other hand, Mick's passion for music works as a metaphor of self-accomplishment yet it sometimes frustrates her and accentuates her sadness. These two sources of emotional fulfilment are further analysed in the next sections.

### **III.I The wedding**

Frankie's brother's wedding takes a major role in the narrative. Frankie feels for the first time that a group (and most significantly, an adult group of people) is actually including her. After so many years of social rejection, she finally feels that she is going to become a member and that people will start looking at her as a grown woman. Actually, in the opening pages of the novel the reader quickly becomes aware of Frankie's main struggle as a character, as she does not belong to any group; 'This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had been an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid.' (8) Most importantly, she does not belong to any solid familiar structure. When she finally realises that the wedding will unite her not only with a group of people, but with her brother and his wife, she becomes excessively excited.

Eventually, the wedding is used in the narrative to show Frankie's personal development and understanding of other more transcendental themes such as love and death.

One of the most important expressions in the novel, ‘they were the we of me’ (*The Member of the Wedding*; 47), epitomizes Frankie’s despair. Her whole development as a character goes around the idea that she will finally become a member, a member of her brother’s wedding. According to Barkowsky;

To Frankie, then, the wedding offers the perfect means of overcoming the essential loneliness which afflicts her. Alone, she is merely a me, a person unjoined with the larger community. Upon merging with Janice and Jarvis she can say that at last she is a part of the world. No longer will she be an insignificant and lonely individual, but she will be able to say that she is a part of the we of life, the society of individuals who belong to each other and who are accepted and understood. (15)

The wedding brings Frankie the opportunity of fulfilling her frustrated desire to be a member, but most importantly, the wedding awakens in her a feeling of potential emotional fulfilment, which is probably why she becomes so obsessed with it. Hence, her obsessive excitement about her brother’s marriage proves to be nothing but an attempt to substitute a father figure which has failed to offer a solid familiar nucleus. She is actually obsessed with the wedding because of what it symbolizes: the possibility of emotional stability and a family. Nonetheless, towards the end of the novel the wedding ends up disappointing Frankie. She had so many expectations that as soon as she realizes that it is simply an event which lasts for less than a day, she feels sad and disappointed: ‘Frances wanted the whole world to die. She sat on the back seat, between the window and Berenice, and, though she was no longer sobbing, the tears were like two little brooks, and also her nose ran water.’(*The Member of the Wedding*; 147)

Her disappointment goes even further when she realizes the ingenuousness of her fantasy about going away with her brother and Janice: “‘All I would like,’ said Frances, after a minute, ‘all I wish in the world, is for no human being ever to speak to me so long as I live.’” (*The Member of the Wedding*; 151) Frankie’s realization of her incapacity to communicate is also crucial at this moment of the narrative. She is not capable of verbalizing her dream of being their new family to Janice and Jarvis: ‘She stood in the

corner of the bride's room, wanting to say: I love the two of you so much and you are the we of me. Please take me with you from the wedding, for we belong to be together.' (*The Member of the Wedding*; 149) For instance, Barkowsky points out that 'Frankie's imaginative world shatters as a result of her inability to communicate with the bride and groom and make them understand the importance of her dream. When she tries to remain in the car with them after the ceremony, Frankie tragically realizes her incapacity for communication.' (16) Frankie finally understands that they are not 'the we of her', and that her connection with the world cannot depend on her brother's marriage.

Furthermore, her inner world suffers a clash when she sees that even though her brother loves her, he does not include her in his life and she cannot always remain a member of his wedding. In contrast, Anna Young understands the wedding as a means for Frankie to be free; 'She realizes that the wedding does not represent a substitute for a relationship but primarily a means of escaping and breaking free from limitations. Frankie is not in love with the couple but rather with what they represent: possibility and mobility.' (87) Even if the wedding could be a means for Frankie to be free, after the actual event her dreams are still left unfulfilled.

Nonetheless, after her realization she keeps dreaming about running away, which is a clear sign of her immaturity and ingenuity. As the naïve girl that Frankie is, after having seen her dream collapse she still believes that she will run away, even if she has to do it alone: 'They thought it was finished, but she would show them. The wedding had not included her, but she would still go into the world. Where she was going she did not know; however, she was leaving town that night.' (*The Member of the Wedding*; 152) Her escape, though, is unsuccessful as she recognizes she is not ready to face the world alone, and gets caught every time. Young argues that 'the need to belong drives her urge to run away, but at the same time, it renders escape impossible as she does not dare to leave until she has found a group or club that will accompany her. The result is that Frankie remains stuck in her

situation, unable to escape.’ (92) Her dream to escape inevitably collapses with her inner desire to find a place where she can fit in. Therefore, her persistent aspiration to feel integrated, have a stable family, or even to find a possible father figure remains frustrated until the end of the novel, where she seems to find a suitable partner for her travels: ‘Frankie has a new obsession, her friend Mary Littlejohn, and together they have begun to make grandiose plans.’ (Young: 93) According to Katherine Bell, however, this character does not have much relevance in the narrative:

Frankie’s new best friend, Mary Littlejohn, is certainly no consolation. She sits in silence sucking on her long blonde braids in an infantile manner, almost as if taunting the reader. She is a death-in-life figure, who evokes the uncanny notion of what the denial of growth and of learning looks like. (72)

Frankie’s dissatisfaction and frustration seem to never be fully fulfilled and even at the very end of the narration her story feels unfinished.

### **III.II Music**

Mick’s source of emotional fulfilment is her passion for music. Barkowsky understands her relationship with music as a desperate attempt to ‘come to terms with her world.’ (11) He also claims that ‘Always on the fringe of activities, she never really belongs to any activity or group. In a vain attempt to identify with something, Mick seeks to relate herself to the music which she hears on her solitary nocturnal walks about town.’ (9-10) The reader notices Mick’s interest from music from the early chapters of the novel, as for her, ‘Nothing was really as good as music.’ (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 43) Her ambitions and interest for singing and listening to music are really important not only because they provide her with a potential evasion from the outside world, but also because they serve as a symbolic hiding place for her. Mick constantly eludes the anxiety that being around too many people causes her and for Mick, being able to feel emotionally attached to music frees her from all apprehensions. A very important aspect of Mick’s physical environment is the fact that she lives in a very crowded house, where not only her family lives but also boarders who pay

for rooms. Mick never really has space for her, which dramatizes her feeling of confinement:

Mick did not want to go back into the rooms where the family stayed. And she did not want to have to talk to any of the boarders. No place was left but the street – and there the sun was too burning hot. [...] ‘Hell,’ she said aloud to herself. ‘Next to a real piano I sure would rather have some pace for myself than anything I know.’ (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 49)

The piano has a strong emotional impact in her. She dreams about having the possibility to produce music, and she is confident that a piano would make her feel happy and free.

Furthermore, her hatred of crowds of people also portrays a very important aspect of her personality. The music makes her feel free, yet it is too private to be played in front of a house full of people. Thus, her frustration for not having a private physical space to actually play music deprives Mick of her own source of emotional freedom: ‘Some kind of music was too private to sing in a house cram full of people. It was funny, too, how lonesome a person could be in a crowded house.’ (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 51) Her passion for music reveals not only her desperate need to feel emotionally accomplished as a human being, but also her desire to physically escape from her environment. She dreams about having a piano, but her musical aspirations go even further and she fantasizes about becoming a famous musician recognized by society, which is a reflection of her desire to be accepted by society and feel integrated.

Despite the fact that Mick seems to have really idealistic ambitions, one should not forget that she is still immature and naïve. An example of that can be seen when she is driven to write an insult as graffiti when she goes around an abandoned house: ‘When that was done she crossed over to the opposite wall and wrote a very bad word – pussy – and beneath that she put her initials, too.’ (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 36) Also, the fact that she believes she can just build a violin with her own hands are evidence of her ingenuity and ignorance of the world of music. The violin is a symbol of her urgent need to feel

connected to music, as she would love to have a piano and a radio but her economic limitations do not allow her to do buy any of these: 'But there's one thing I would give anything for. And that's a piano. If we had a piano I'd practise every single night and learn every piece in the world. That's the thing I want more than anything else.' (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 39) Her desires remain unaccomplished because she cannot afford any of the instruments she dreams of. Additionally, she has to stop her piano lessons because of the family's economic situation. Mick's aspirations are constantly frustrated by her own environment and her lack of means to reach her goals.

Moreover, the way music makes her feel is ambivalent: 'But they all made her somehow sad and excited at the same time.' (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 37) In a way, her passion for music becomes masochist, not only because of the frustration that it causes her, but also because it prompts a painful feeling in her body that she actually enjoys. She is particularly affected by a piece of a Beethoven symphony, which for Mick felt like a 'queer thing' (212). The most crucial element of Mick's inside room is essentially music. The inside room epitomizes her inner self, what constructs her identity. It is often described as 'a universe of her own creation filled with music and dreams of faraway, cool places.' (Barkovsky: 12) From Adam Hutchinson's point of view, Mick 'retains her will to fantasize about the piano and places value in herself by the potential to someday make her own music.'(22) Therefore, the frustration that music causes Mick prevents her from feeling fully emotionally fulfilled, yet it provides her with a source of hope and happiness for the future. For the protagonist, music is the only way to feel connected to the world and compensate for the lack of support and love in her life.

#### **IV. The role of symbolic foils**

In this section I am going to interpret the role the symbolic foils play in the narratives. The two protagonists' coming of age is highly influenced by the absence of a strong familiar nucleus of which they can feel part of, which is obviously a very determining factor in any child's life. As noticed, both Mr Kelly and Mr Addams have failed to provide any kind of ethical or moral education to their children. Their role as fathers is conditioned either by their own choice to escape in the case of *The Member* or because of external circumstances as in the case of *The Heart*.

In these novels where the desertion of the father marks such a crucial moment of the protagonist's youth, the search for an alternative figure that fulfils this emptiness becomes a key aspect of their youthful adventure. Frankie and Mick, as many kids that are going through puberty, have a strong lack of self-esteem and a lot of insecurities. Because of their gender condition, these insecurities are even more dramatized and accentuate their alienation. However, in the two narratives we find characters which not only work as potential role models, but who also fulfil the protagonists' expectations for parental figures.

In *The Member*, Frankie's older brother plays a key role in the story. He has always been very distant, yet she idealizes him and dreams about the idea of being a part of his wedding. Her brother's marriage could provide her with stability, with a model of family which she can be part of: 'they are the we of me'(47). Nonetheless, her brother does not seem to want her in his life either. Notwithstanding the fact that it is her brother that she looks up to, he takes, by no means, the role of the father. In fact, most of the time throughout the novel, he is only present in Frankie's mind and fantasies and not as a real influencing character in her life. It is Berenice who, without realising, works as a conscious and educative voice that somehow takes the fatherly role.

Berenice is a symbolic foil that embodies the mature voice that explains Frankie how things really are, and she is very influential for Frankie's development. She is the one

that spends time with her at home and contributes to her understanding of complex themes from ‘the adult world’ such as love, sex or death. One of the key moments of the novel is, indeed, the first time Frankie gets to have a real talk about love. She had never had one of those conversations before, and it is Berenice who educates her in this aspect: ‘So that was how the queer conversation began at quarter to six on the last afternoon. It was the first time ever they had talked about love, with F. Jasmine included in the conversation as a person who understood and had worth-while opinions.’ (*The Member of the Wedding*; 109-110) Berenice was the only one who took Frankie seriously and really cared about her. She has the potential to provide her with an alternative family and fulfil the emptiness of her father’s absence. However, Frankie does not seem to be content with Berenice (and John Henry) being her alternative family. Proehl argues that this might be a result of Frankie’s idealization of her brother’s marriage:

Frankie’s fixation on her exclusion from her brother’s wedding prevents her from recognizing fully John Henry and Berenice as her family or, to use her terminology, as her “we of me.” Not only have John Henry and Berenice supplanted Frankie’s relationships with her nuclear family members, but also they exist at the margins of normative white society due to their racial and gender identities. (Proehl 93)

It is also argued that Frankie could have seen Berenice and John Henry as a potential ‘we’ of her, yet it is the death of John Henry by the end of the narrative what makes Frankie reject this idea: ‘In *Member*, it is the lost utopian, interracial, mixed gender, and significantly, inter-age, threesome—the “we” of Frankie, John Henry, and Berenice— that provides the melancholic loss that Frankie cannot recognize [...]’ (Thurschwell 123) Frankie, then, for interracial or for age issues, rejects this potential family even when she is actually seeking to belong to one: ‘Despite desperately wanting to be a part of a group, it seems that Frankie would rather be alone than belong with Berenice and John Henry, who are described as “the last we in the world she wanted”’ (Anna young: 53)



In the case of Mick in *The Heart* Mr Singer represents a surrogate father figure that fulfils her feeling of isolation in her own family. Mick connects her relationship with Singer with music because, according to her, they both make her feel the same way. Despite Singer's deafness, Mick feels a special connection with him that allows her to be herself and talk about her inner feelings and ambitions whenever they are together: 'Even if he was a deaf-and-dumb mute he understood every word she said to him. [...] It was like finding out new things about music.' (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 83) Another important aspect of this mysterious character is that he is the only person in Mick's inside room: 'In the inside room, along with music, there was Mister Singer' (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 212) To Mick, Mr Singer is a very important figure because she sees in him a powerful image of a potential father. He is like the father she has not had, and her emotional development is much more conditioned by Singer's influence than by her real father's one. Nevertheless, differently from Frankie and Berenice, this relationship is not reciprocal and it is the 'father' who does not respond to her in the same way: 'Singer was always the same to everyone' (84). To him, Mick's relationship is not special and his only true friend is Antonapoulos. Mick confesses to Singer all her worries but he keeps his thoughts to himself; he does not reciprocate Mick's confidences. For instance, when he goes to visit his friend he does not tell anyone. Even though Mick admires Singer and thinks of their relationship as very special and unique, this admiration is not mutual.

Portia is also a very influential character for the protagonist's coming-of-age. Similarly to Berenice, she is also a black servant in the house. She is the only one who notices Mick's vulnerability and emotions. Mick feels identified with Portia because she also expresses her inconformity with her father-daughter relationship. Portia explains how she would love to have a closer relationship with her father, since he has spent more time on studying and becoming a doctor than actually taking care of his child. They both have in common that their dads have not fulfilled their duties as fathers. However, it is Singer who works as a

symbolic foil in Mick's narration and really has influence over her emotional development. Singer is a representation of Mick's aspirations; she romantically idealises him and he is the one who works as a confidant and marks her personal growth. It is worth mentioning that Mr Singer is actually a clear illustration of a marginal character: he is deaf mute whose best friend has been taken to an insane asylum. However, he is the only person to whom Mick feels emotionally attached and the one who relieves her feeling of marginalisation. Paradoxically, being a deaf-mute, Singer is the best listener for Mick. In fact, his remoteness is a very key aspect of his personality. Because he is a deaf-mute, he is partly unable to communicate, which allows the other characters to interpret his silence their own way. Mick really believes he understands and supports her, even though she does not really have proof of that. Preeti Singh and Mahesh Kumar assert that 'Failure to communicate swells the heart with unshared sorrows and pent up feelings, ultimately leading to the destruction of the self as in the case of Singer.' (38)

Mr Singer's death at the end of the novel is one of the major events of the narrative especially for Mick, who had developed a kind of dependence towards him. After he had killed himself, Mick is not the same girl anymore. Mr Singer's death coincides with her abrupt jump into adulthood due to her obligation to work. Therefore, she feels like not only has she lost her youth, but at the same time she has to face her best friend's death: 'There were these two things she could never believe. That Mister Singer had killed himself and was dead. And that she was grown and had to work at Woolworth's.' (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 306) Such tragic event marks her and makes her inside room faint: 'But now no music was in her mind. That was a funny thing. It was like she was shut out from the inside room. [...] It was like the inside room was locked somewhere away from her. A very hard thing to understand.' (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*; 307) Mr Singer's death leaves Mick without her silent confidant but, essentially, without a potential father figure. Thereupon, she becomes more vulnerable than ever and like in Frankie's case, her story is left

unfinished. This is partly because of the nature of coming-of-age, which does not really have a beginning and an end, but rather, it is just an incessant process of transition and growth.

## **V. Conclusion**

*The Member of the Wedding* and *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* portray the psychological and moral growth of adolescent protagonists who are transitioning from childhood to adulthood. The dialogue of these often alienated, confused and rebel adolescents is a reflection of their spiritual and emotional isolation as they try to understand the adult world they are entering to. These two novels illustrate the way through which Carson McCullers explores spiritual isolation, liminality and social alienation.

Mick and Frankie, two young girls who break the stereotype of female coming-of-age protagonists in American literature, embody the exploration of such development. In Gleeson-White's words; 'Through their gender insubordination, Mick and Frankie unsettle the status quo of the southern patriarchy; they unsettle the seemingly easy distinction between feminine and masculine that underpins stable gender identity.' (71) Moreover, throughout their search for emotional fulfilment and social acceptance, the protagonists show not only the significance of the father-daughter relationship in a girl's early life, but also how the absence of such an influential figure can condition their personal growth. By means of analysing the two characters' liminality and transition towards womanhood in the narratives, this essay has aimed to show the way by which the search for an alternative father is a key aspect of their youthful experience.

Mick and Frankie's identity struggles result from the lack of a satisfactory relationship with their father and the absence of a solid familial nucleus. Despite these absences, the two girls are able to find a source of spiritual and moral education under the influence of the

symbolic foils Berenice and Mr Singer. They become the potential alternative father that the protagonists need in their adolescence; the mature and wise voices that will help them grow and understand more significant aspects of life, such as love and death. Furthermore, while trying to find means to fulfil their lack of affection, Frankie becomes obsessed with her brother's wedding and Mick locks herself in her inside-room, to which only Mr Singer and music have access.

Nonetheless, Mr Singer's death and Frankie's inconformity with the idea of Berenice being her potential family make the girls' aspirations fade away. Their coming-of-age is altered by a brutal jump into adulthood that they have to face alone. Growing up is a process that involves not only physical changes but also shaping one's identity and moral conscience. The authoritative language of the father becomes a fundamental factor for the adolescence's complete moral and social education, and the lack of such relationship leaves the young protagonists with an endless sense of alienation and delusion. Thus, their internal desires to be socially accepted and belong to a family will always remain unsatisfied.

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