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Girlhood and Engendered Alienation in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*

Lauren C. Dolese
lrchauvi@uno.edu

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Girlhood and (En)gendered Alienation in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and
A Tree Grows in Brooklyn

A Thesis

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

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in
English

by

Lauren Chauvin Dolese

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Abstract

Utilizing a girls' studies perspective and materialist feminist lens, this paper seeks to put Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) in conversation with Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943). Besides being published in the early 1940s, both works feature young girls navigating class struggles, exploring their identities, and struggling against dominant ideologies specific to their time and place. McCullers' and Smith's novels depict how a patriarchal, capitalist society imposes upon young women a narrow, misogynistic view of themselves and the women around them—facilitating the social reproduction of oppression and alienation. In depicting these realities of girlhood during the early twentieth-century, these authors established their work as inherently feminist. However, the conversations surrounding these novels must continue to evolve and include topics like unwaged labor, slut-shaming, purity culture, and internalized misogyny, among others.

Keywords: Carson McCullers; Betty Smith; girls' studies; girlhood; materialist feminism; American literature

Introduction

The influence capitalist patriarchy has on the lives of women is not an unexplored secret, it lives and thrives within literature. Materialist feminists have been researching and refining an understanding of how gender, as a social construct, has constrained women's economic opportunities for decades. However, the attention given within social movements and literary criticism to how this two-fold system of oppression impacts young girls, perceived as not formally part of their workforce, has been negligible. Girls have typically been ignored in favor of discussing their mothers. As noted by some girls' studies scholars, "By suggesting that youth do not have traits that might contribute to political involvement and state affairs...feminist thinkers of the late nineteenth century purposefully constructed adult women as the only females worthy of civil rights and thus excluded girls from feminist agendas" (Kearny 9).

Approaching twentieth-century novels through the lens of girls' studies reveals how capitalism facilitates the internalized misogyny that reproduces patriarchy within the minds of girls, prior to them becoming fully engrossed in the workforce (either as employees or dependents of employed men). Novels like Carson McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1943) function as quintessential examples of literature that demonstrate how gendered oppression for women begins at childhood. Unlike boys, (especially during the early twentieth-century), girls begin taking on responsibilities within their families at a young age; responsibilities that function as sites of social reproduction, which encompasses, "activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally... care and socialization of children... the social organization of sexuality" – the elements of stories about girls (Laslett and Brenner 382-3). Both novels feature young girls navigating class struggles,

exploring their identities, and struggling against dominant ideologies specific to their time and place. While progressing through childhood, each girl is confronted by the labor of womanhood in addition to the constraints placed upon women within the workforce, long before they even reach employable age.

Classified under different genres, these novels articulate a strikingly similar story to drastically different audiences. McCullers' audiences, in college classrooms and independent reading, have attempted to give equal attention to each of the main characters, analyzing the influences of race, class, sexuality, and regional influences. Meanwhile, Smith's audiences have largely been primary school students and independent young readers lacking the language necessary to unpack everything. Neither have been examined as sites of social reproduction, not through their depictions of that reproduction or as texts that could be reproducing damaging ideas to the girls that identify with them. Additionally, McCullers' and Smith's novels depict how a patriarchal, capitalist society imposes upon young women a narrow, misogynistic view of themselves and the women around them—facilitating the social reproduction of oppression.

Establishing the social understanding of “gender” during the early twentieth century is crucial to performing any analysis of Carson McCullers' and Betty Smith's novels. In Judith Lorber's 1996 essay, “Beyond the Binaries: Depolarizing the Categories of Sex, Sexuality, and Gender,” Lorber details how gender has historically been constructed. The essay states, “sex and gender are used interchangeably, and sex sometimes means sexuality, sometimes physiology or biology, and sometimes social status...Variations in gender displays are ignored: A woman is assumed to be a feminine female; a man a masculine male. Heterosexuality is the uninterrogated norm against which variations are deviance” (Rogers and Lorber 15). Recent challenges to these norms have attempted to disrupt any prior assumptions associated with one's assigned gender.

However, during the period when McCullers and Smith were writing their novels, being assigned female at birth would have led to rigid norms regarding sexuality, dress, behavior, positions within a traditional family structure—the list goes on. Therefore, when referring to gender, let it be implied that a classification of gender/sex was medically assigned, while gender expression was socially enforced. Furthermore, when referring to “girls” versus “women” when describing female characters, it is an attempt to distinguish the experiences of those still considered children or adolescent from those who are viewed as adults. Although this distinction has not remained static, within the context of Smith and McCullers’ novels girlhood appears to end around age sixteen or seventeen-years-old, when school ends and working begins.

Most of the scholarship on *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, which mainly focuses on elements of queer sexuality and deviation from prescribed gender norms when examining how gender functions within McCullers’ texts, leaves many stones unturned. It also reduces the conversation to one that remains too deeply rooted in how the author lived her life outside of fiction. For example, in “Relegation and Rebellion: The Queer, The Grotesque, and the Silent in the Fiction of Carson McCullers,” Melissa Free states, “McCullers’ personal history is relevant to a reading of her texts, given the ‘implicit [autobiography] barely submerged below the surface of her fiction’” (429). Free then proclaims Virginia Carr’s biography of the author “[reveals] McCullers’s complex sexual and emotional makeup” before spending more than a page discussing McCullers’ fear of intimacy and characterizing her behavior as internalized homophobia (430). This discourse has failed to recognize the girlhood-specific struggles endured by Mick, the thirteen-year-old girl living in small-town Georgia from the spring of 1938 to the end of summer the next year.

On the other hand, Smith's work has received little academic attention despite being lauded as a classic bildungsroman. Considered an early example of young adult fiction, there is little scholarship in existence that considers Smith's novel through a theoretical framework. The few essays examining Smith's novel focus on poverty, as well as gender roles and the family's immigrant status. Kathleen Therrien's essay, "Why Do They Have To... To... Say Things...?": Poverty, Class, and Gender in Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*," provides space for class, gender, and the role of ideology. However the discussion remains limited by its emphasis on a historical understanding of poverty. The essay addresses "many (apparent) choices, and reactions to these choices [that are] ...structured by the constraints and expectations generated by powerful ideas about gender and gender roles," but only cites Francie's encounter with two medical professionals and her father's death to convey how class and gender intersect in the novel (Therrien 99). Therrien, like so many McCullers' scholars, is preoccupied with the autobiographical failing to recognize the ideologies pressing down on the protagonist as she progresses from age eleven to sixteen, from girlhood to adulthood, in a neighborhood populated by other immigrant families in Brooklyn, New York.

This essay is intended to bring Betty Smith's novel into conversation with Carson McCullers, allowing *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* to be given the critical attention it deserves. By comparing how each girl encounters and understands their gender identity, looking to their internal dialogue, family relationships, social interactions, and experiences with labor, the novels reveal how gender norms, with the help of capitalism, invade the hearts and minds of girls—leaving them alienated. Additionally, in tandem these novels expose how universal and enduring internalized misogyny was for girls of the twentieth-century, no matter what region or religion determined their experience. Ultimately, this essay intends to establish *The Heart Is a Lonely*

Hunter and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* as quintessential examples of texts that are inherently pro-girl yet contain misogynistic rhetoric that must be openly identified and unpacked to the benefit of younger readers.

Gender Perception

Carson McCullers' protagonist, Mick Kelly, is a thirteen-year-old girl who begins the novel hoping to become a famous musician or composer. Mick is described by Biff Brannon, another central character, as “a gangling, towheaded youngster...dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes—so that at first glance she was like a very young boy” (McCullers 18). When she is not toting her younger brothers around town, she is daydreaming about her future, doing whatever she can to access music and instruments. She values spending time within her “inside room” above all else, often venturing out late at night to be alone with her thoughts.

Mick perceives being female as something detrimental to her sense of self. In the first chapter dedicated to the young girl, the issue of gender arises quickly with McCullers establishing that Mick identifies femininity with the traits she finds most annoying in her sisters. She looks upon her older sisters, detailing their concerns about their appearances, accusing Etta of “being full of worms” for wanting to be a movie star and Hazel of being “plain lazy” and “soft” (McCullers 41,42). When they comment on her clothing, she declares her preference for boy's shorts is an attempt to distance herself from them, refusing to wear their old clothing. Digging her heels in, Mick asserts “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...I'd rather be a boy any day” (McCullers 42). She associates being female with the vanity and self-interest of her sisters leading to her vehemently distancing herself from anything obviously female. Like so many other adolescent girls, Mick seems to believe that women are automatically feminine—meaning certain clothing paired with a limited number of prescribed actions and personality traits. Early in the novel, it is abundantly clear that Mick Kelly wants nothing to do with any version of that femininity. Instead, she gravitates towards the masculine and considers the feminine to be inferior to the masculine.

Regardless of how socially taboo it would have been for men to perform femininity or women to express masculinity, it is critical to note that the interactions Mick has with her sisters function as a clear indication of her internalized misogyny. Sibling rivalry is universally experienced, however Mick's attention to other members of her gender is so limited that these emotionally charged exchanges shape her relationship with womanhood significantly. She pays little attention to the other girls at school or women in town with those interactions eliciting virtually no response.

Furthermore, Mick attempts to disassociate herself from other girls by projecting what she understands as traditionally masculine—confidence and ability—while shaming other members of her gender who do not do the same. When thinking about her nights alone, she considers how, unlike other kids, she is not afraid to wander alone; meanwhile “girls were scared a man would come out from somewhere and put his teapot in her like they was married” (McCullers 101-2). She then goes on to explain that “most girls were nuts” but she would simply run or “give [them] a good sock and go right on,” positioning herself as superior to those other girls who fear sexual assault (McCullers 102). While her assuming she can physically defend herself against an adult man could be chalked up to a childish understanding of danger, her need to degrade other girls highlights her view of girls as generally inferior.

As time passes Mick begins to leave childhood behind and explore what it means to enter womanhood. When Mick is first introduced, she asserts herself as outside of the world of womanhood inhabited by her sisters and the other women within their household. She ultimately decides that becoming a woman means the end of activities that others have deemed boyish. In essence gender fluidity is no longer an option. If she is a woman, she must act like a woman in the ways people expect her to. The evening of her prom party, thrown in an attempt to make

more vocational school friends, marks the beginning of this conversion. Etta and Hazel loan Mick a gown, heels, tiara, and silk intimates for the occasion. In a fit of excitement Mick dresses from head-to-toe in their garments. Immediately “she didn’t feel like herself at all” but rather “somebody different than Mick Kelly entirely” (McCullers 107). Throwing the party makes Mick feel like she must undergo a hyper-feminine metamorphosis of sorts, which instantly makes her reflection unrecognizable to her, despite no one directly telling her she needs to do this. No one has to tell her because the messaging around her, in popular culture and from the older girls in her life, have been hinting at this metamorphosis. An internalized understanding of womanhood as silky dresses, makeup, and pumps urges Mick to put aside what makes her feel comfortable in her own skin to move on to the next phase of life. She feels, or rather assumes, that girls can be masculine (likely because she has been afforded this freedom), but women must suppress any instinct to do so.

As the party erupts into chaos, Mick finds herself overwhelmed with a sense of finality, proclaiming herself “too big to wear shorts any more after this. No more after this night. Not any more” (McCullers 116). This realization comes after the uninvited neighborhood children turn her sophisticated evening into an opportunity to run wild. Finding herself frustrated with this, she resolves to not be one of those unruly children any longer. But before the evening is over, Mick allows herself to give in to the excitement and run wild. In fact, through her excitement she realizes “the big kids were the ones who messed up everything...this was just a regular playing-out...The kids had caused it. They were like a catching sickness, and their coming to the party made all the other people forget about high school and being almost grown” (McCullers 114, 115). She realizes that faced with the boundless, feral energy of the neighborhood children the other teenagers decide to do whatever they want, regardless of any expectations associated with

their age. She pathologizes her peers for going against the expectations associated with their age, deeming them to be sick for acting like small children. Their behavior in these moments strongly contrasts with their formal, self-conscious behavior during the prom. They were just segregating themselves by gender, following the strict rules of prom, and picking certain partners out of politeness, and now they are running and screaming. Despite referring to this disruptive play as a “sickness,” Mick treats her outburst of wild excitement as a final hurrah. After she picks herself up out of a ditch, missing tiara and all, she decides this is a turning point in how she will present herself to the world, but it does not seem like a choice entirely her own.

After only two chapters focusing on Mick, it is apparent that Mick understands gender as restrictive, as well as something that can no longer be ignored as she grows older. Mick demonstrates that her patriarchal world has not only forced her to reconsider how she behaves and dresses, but how she feels about her corporeal existence. When Harry Minowitz asks Mick how old she is during their prom walk, she assumes he is thinking about her size. Not only does she feel self-conscious about the development of her body, stating “It used to worry her all the time. Five feet six inches tall and a hundred and three pounds, and she was only thirteen,” but the opinion of boys is at the forefront of her concern (McCullers 111). She goes on to tell herself, “No boy wanted to prom with a girl so much taller than him” (McCullers 111). Mick goes from beaming with pride about how special she feels that night to worrying about how to minimize herself to meet expectations, even affirming that “maybe the cigarettes would help stunt the rest of her growth” (McCullers 111). Sarah Gleeson-White asserts that within McCullers’ novel “femininity is ideally pocket-sized, presenting the perfect woman as a miniature and as something to be collected and hoarded” (Gleeson-White 112). Just on the cusp of puberty, Mick has begun to de-center her own opinion about her body in favor of the male gaze. She wants to

be desirable despite not yet understanding what she herself finds desirable or comfortable. Mick is beginning to see herself as an object to be had.

As Mick grapples with growing up, she continues to dream of one day becoming a “great world-famous composer,” telling herself she would “wear either a real man’s evening suit or else a red dress spangled with rhinestones” (McCullers 240-41). Mick believes that using her talent to obtain wealth and fame will grant her access to the gender fluidity she desires. She associates rigid gender norms with the poverty her family experiences. The very concept of a woman presenting masculinity does not seem impossible or wrong to Mick. It is simply not something obtainable for someone existing outside of the upper echelon.

Frances ‘Francie’ Nolan, Betty Smith’s protagonist, is only eleven years old when her story begins. Francie spends her days journeying to the library, hoping to accomplish her goal of reading every book in alphabetical order. On Saturdays, she takes her younger brother, Neely, out to sell what junk they have discovered during the week in exchange for candy money. She stays up late anxiously awaiting her father’s arrival, happy to join him in song as he returns home from an evening performing as a singing waiter. She daydreams and observes the neighborhood whenever she can, taking in a variety of local characters and collecting nuggets of knowledge.

Throughout the novel, it is abundantly clear that Francie comes to understand womanhood as inextricable linked to corporeality. She considers the female body to be something exciting, waiting in anticipation for the day that she ‘becomes a woman.’ Upon turning thirteen she writes, “‘Today I am a woman’ ...She looked down on her long thin and as yet formless legs. She crossed out the sentence and started over. ‘Soon, I shall become a woman.’ She looked down on her chest which was as flat as a washboard and ripped the page out of the book” (Smith 227). Instead of seeing herself a merely a young woman, she relegates

herself to outside of womanhood because her body does not possess the traits of a so-called woman. In this way, she focuses on a not only sexualized version of the female body, but one that is romanticized to young girls. Francie imagines that her life will transform when her body does. For Francie being a female has less to do with behaviors perceived as feminine, but rather a physical presence that fits into a standardized body type—it is all about assigned secondary sex characteristics. Not yet possessing breasts and visible curves desirable in women, Francie cannot conceive herself as a member of that gender.

Francie's mother also pushes an understanding of womanhood as linked to maintaining a standard of beauty that appeals to the male gaze. When Francie first poses as a sixteen year old to get a job, she begs Katie to allow her to get a drastic haircut arguing that getting it bobbed would mean less maintenance. Her mother responds by asserting, "why do you want short hair like a boy? ...taking care of her hair should be a woman's pleasure...A woman's hair is her mystery. Daytimes, it's pinned up. But at night, alone with her man, he pins come out and it hangs loose like a shining cape. It makes a special secret woman for the man" (Smith 371). First, Katie attempts to instruct Francie that long hair functions as a gender marker therefore short hair would masculinize her. Then, not only does she deny her daughter the freedom of physical expression by not letting her get a haircut, but she reinforces that Francie's body is not entirely her own. Francie must keep her hair long, even if it is an encumbrance to her, to please a hypothetical man in the future.

In fact, she believes that being a woman is to inhabit a body preset with a range of capabilities and burdens, a body that could unintentionally demand attention. When the novel begins, Francie is only eleven years old, barely on the precipice of puberty already believing that there is something harmful about girls "too developed for their age...girls whom the neighbors

prophesied would come to no good” (Smith 8). She is acutely aware of the inevitable shift that occurs once a child ages into womanhood and her body becomes sexualized, and as a result, becomes open for discussion. Throughout her adolescence Francie looks to the women she encounters in her neighborhood and at school assessing their bodies and lifestyles, often declaring her intention to not be like them. When she encounters a particularly cruel teacher, she deduces “they taught because no one wanted to marry them...These barren women spent their fury on the other women’s children in a twisted authoritative manner” (Smith 151). Francie believes that older and seemingly unhappy women must have failed to be desirable or been incapable of bearing children. She demonizes them for not realizing her understanding of full-fledged womanhood. Their bodies did not meet expectations; therefore, they deserve their fate.

Subsequently, like Mick Kelly, a large portion of her gender identification is rooted in feeling like, and hoping to be, the antithesis of other women. She seeks to understand herself through observing those around her and internalizing public opinion regarding how women should look and act. Neighborhood gossip aimed at older girls, in addition to members of her own family, provides a catalogue of information on supposedly acceptable behavior.

When discovering a profanity-filled commotion over a young unwed mother, she surmises, “That was [her] crime—not that she has been bad, but that she had not been smart enough to get the boy to the church” without “knowing the whole story” (Smith 233). This moment of realization, along with many others throughout her youth, contributes to Francie’s understanding of how women are policed by their peers, and punished if need be. This experience not only contributes to her views on sex and relationships, but causes her to declare, “As long as I live, I will never have a woman for a friend. I will never trust any woman again”

(Smith 236). Witnessing the cruelty inflicted upon the girl by a group of women brings her hostility towards women to a new level.

Paired with her judgement of other women, Francie also comes to understand those physical/biological capabilities associated with the female body as pivotal to womanhood. Throughout the novel, Francie expresses fascination with her Aunt Sissy (who “had given birth to ten children, all of whom had died soon after being born)” and a preoccupation with whether women she encounters are mothers (Smith 40). The first time she experiences real cruelty at the hands of another woman she confusingly ponders her previous assumption that “all women were mamas,” not understanding why any woman could be mean to a child (Smith 144). She has assumed that to be a woman is to be maternal in all situations.

When meeting Aunt Sissy’s baby, she happily proclaims, “When I get big, I’ll always have a new baby in the house,” eagerly joining her aunt in believing that having a child is the quintessential experience for those assigned female (Smith 313). She centers the experiences of being pregnant, giving birth, and nurturing children, believing that all women want to and do experience these processes. To her a woman is a mother, until proven otherwise. In fact, as her disdain for other women increases, she begins to tell herself, “Most women had the one thing in common: they had great pain when they gave birth to their children. This should make a bond that held them all together; it should make them love and protect each other against the man-world. But it was not so. It seemed like their great birth pains shrank their hearts and their souls” (Smith 235). The premise that all women have children is inherently flawed, but Francie does not know it because the women in her life place more value on the ability to bear children than anything else. Despite being related to a person who struggled to carry a healthy baby to full-term, Francie assumes that every woman is naturally capable of having children. She also

assumes that all women want to have children and experience a predetermined transformation into a certain role— the woman’s role of nurturing and maternal to all. This has placed misguided limitations on her understanding of how women exist. Additionally, she does seem to already have a firm grasp on the male dominance that determines the lives of women and girls, but instead of calling it patriarchy, she deems it “man-world.”

Familial Interactions and Influences

Looking to the girls' families further reveals how gender norms have been reproduced in their daily lives and generationally. In Mick Kelly's life, between her parents, three brothers, two sisters, and the family's hired domestic worker she is exposed to an array of gender expressions. She approaches these individuals with varying degrees of contempt and interest. Mick's parents exist in opposition within her life. Her mother is barely around and is given little to no thought by Mick, while her father occupies her time and receives dedicated space in her mind. The only characterization given by Mick of her mother describes her as "[looking] as though she has a lot on her mind and didn't have time" (McCullers 46). This lack of interest in her mother reinforces how Mick would rather look to male role models than female ones. Her mother is just another cog in the machine that is the Kelly household. Mick's mother is viewed by her as less of a fixture in the house than the hired help. Mick engages in debates with Portia on God and love before evading any questions posed by her mother. She is even hurt by what Portia says to her, allowing Portia's opinions of her to penetrate the façade of toughness she projects.

Meanwhile, her father's work history, relationships with her other siblings, and feelings are considered by Mick. She feels compelled to lend him her ear when he needs someone to talk to, even if she would rather just leave. At some point, she even realizes that he is "a real separate person," beyond being her father—a point she never considers with her mother (McCullers 99). Moreover, she spends enough time with him to realize that he is struggling, not just financially but emotionally. She understands that he is "lonesome...because none of the kids went to him for anything and because he didn't earn much money he felt like he was cut off from the family" (McCullers 101). He is someone she respects, worries about, and values. In many ways her concern for her father is rooted in gendered expectations; the father is supposed to provide and

be needed by the family. She sees the value in his position as head of the family and mourns with him for all that he has lost.

Besides her older sisters and her mother, whom she pays no attention to, Mick has Portia, a Black woman employed by her parents who Mick perceives through a white supremacist lens (like many of her peers). In fact, Mick sees her and compares her to other Black women, rather than the Black community as a whole. She compares her against other Black women attributing value to the ways in which she believes her to be different, stating “she would never do anything mean to Bubber or Ralph on the sly like some [Black] girls” (McCullers 51). Again, Mick is taking the opportunity to seek comparisons, to pit women against each other. She cannot look past Portia’s race, nor does she cease to judge other women by comparison.

However, for Mick the relationships she has with her siblings, older and younger, contribute substantially to her sense of self and her understanding of the strict confines of gender expression. Through her eyes, her older sisters only care about their looks, beauty products, and themselves. Etta “primed all the day long,” layering on products, and attempting to exercise her way to a more defined chin—the feature she would “cry in the night about” (McCullers 41-2). Mick decides all this laboring for and fixation on beauty is because Etta is not as beautiful as Hazel, the oldest sister. Hazel is seen by Mick as “good-looking but thick in the head” (McCullers 42). This characterization mirrors the misogynistic comments men often make about women who possess highly sought-after beauty without contributing much else, disregarding the ways in which female intelligence is typically discouraged. She sees herself as smarter than her sisters merely because they value different things and react in opposition to each other. However, this aversion is mutual. Hazel declares that “it makes [her] sick to see [Mick] in those silly boy’s clothes” before insisting “somebody ought to clamp down on [her] and make [her] behave”

(McCullers 42). Undoubtedly, exchanges like this with hyperfeminine women leave an indelible mark, impacting Mick's relationship with the feminine and those who seek to enforce it. Hazel not only attempts to bully her younger sister into conforming but hopes that someone will step in and punish Mick for her defiant spirit.

Bill, the oldest son, is the family member most venerated by Mick when the novel begins. She finds his room to be the "nicest room of anybody in the family" with its minimal furniture and myriad of magazine clippings of "mostly faces of beautiful ladies" (McCullers 42). Mick is in awe of him as he reads *Popular Mechanics* after retreating from an argument with her sisters in their shared room. However, Mick acknowledges that she and Bill no longer have the chummy relationship they once did. Although he has no qualms with her hanging out in his space, he does not "begin tussling with her hair like he used to do" (McCullers 43). When he tells Mick that her homemade violin will never work, and he knew it all along, Mick admits "sometimes she hated Bill more than anyone else in the world. He was different entirely from what he used to be" (McCullers 46). She mourns for the time when her older brother was also her friend, something she later struggles to maintain with Bubber. Bill acts as an example to Mick, as someone she looked up to and as someone who demonstrates the drastic change she expects to undergo as she ages. Though she is disappointed that their relationship has changed, she does not link it to a fight or a particularly negative interaction. She attributes it to his aging away from childhood.

In fact, Bill embodies the epitome of masculinity within the Kelly family to Mick, not yet demoralized by financial strife like their father. She notes instances in which her father has made hurtful comments about Bill before deciding those remarks no longer have an effect on him. He has aged into a sort of detachment; he feels compelled to pull away from his family. In Nancy C. M. Hartsock's essay "The Feminist Standpoint: Towards a Specifically Feminist Historical

Materialism,” she suggests “nothing of value to the boy occurs within the family, and masculinity becomes an abstract ideal to be achieved over the opposition of daily life. Masculinity must be attained by means of opposition to the concrete world of daily life, by escaping from contact with the female world of the household into the masculine world of politics or public life” (Rogers 264). Bill is pulling away from his family and moving towards building his own life outside of the Kelly home. He is more interested in being a man than a son or brother.

Perhaps the most significant sibling relationship Mick has is with her younger brother, Bubber. Just like Mick, Bubber is interested in clothing and hobbies generally considered inappropriate for someone of his gender. When Bubber, Mick, and another neighborhood boy spot Baby, a hyperfeminine four-year-old girl practicing for her dance recital, Bubber states, “I sure do wish I had a costume...a real pretty one made out of all different colors. Like a butterfly” (McCullers 165-6). This prompts his peer to call him a “sissy,” which Bubber ignores before going on to describe how he would “dance around in [his] costume if [he] had one” (McCullers 166). Instead of Bubber getting upset over being ridiculed, Mick jumps to his defense, stating, “Bubber—he looks sick, and likes pretty things, but he’s got guts underneath that” (McCullers 166). Mick is quick to admit that there is nothing wrong with her brother being interested in outfits considered girly however she feels that this appreciation for beauty must be paired with strength. She embarks on a monologue, wanting to immediately and firmly establish her brother’s toughness—a trait traditionally seen in stark contrast to frilly pink dresses and dance numbers. Despite Bubber being the only sibling that shares her desire to be both masculine and feminine, Mick finds it necessary to uphold gender expression stereotypes to protect him. Following Bubber’s accidental shooting of Baby, he transforms into the epitome of the stoic

Southern man. He ceases to show interest in anything traditionally feminine, focusing instead on a reserved, restrictive form of masculinity. This change drastically impacts his relationship with Mick. As he begins to go by George, his real name, he feels removed to Mick as if he is a different person all together.

Betty Smith's characters, on the other hand, participate in a system of starkly different family dynamics with intergenerational relationships. Francie's mother, Katie comes from a matriarchal family, with two sisters who strive to be closeknit. Mary Rommely, Katie's mother, is a German immigrant, and devout Catholic who:

had been a virgin when she married and had humbly submitted to her husband's brutal love. His brutality early killed all of her latent desires. Yet she could understand the fierce love hunger that made girls—as people put it—go wrong. She understood how a boy who had been driven from the neighborhood for rape could still be a good boy at heart...Mary was convinced that because of some sin she had unwittingly committed in her life, she was mated with the devil himself. (Smith 60)

Mary preserved her virginity, as her faith demanded, before “humbly” and submissively giving herself over to a man whose violent tendencies destroyed any part of her that sought out pleasure within their union. She did everything she was supposed to do and still faced “brutal” hardship. This experience fueled her understanding of womanhood as inextricably linked to suffering. She burdens herself with so-called Catholic guilt, assuming that she must have done something to deserve cruelty. Her focus on earned punishment as well as girls who “go wrong” is carried forward to the next generation of Rommely women, with varying degrees of interest in Catholicism. Mrs. Rommely protected her daughters Sissy, Evy, and Katie, from their father the best she could. She also “wept when they gave birth to daughters, knowing that to be born a

woman meant a life of humble hardship” (Smith 61). Mary believes that women and girls are doomed to suffer, yet she must have done something sinful to earn her lot. Simultaneously, Mary (like many others) supports the general belief that boys can make mistakes, but still be good and deserve forgiveness. Katie applies a similar contradictory belief to her children.

Alison Graham-Bertolini states that McCullers’ novels “depict how women in the United States have historically been indoctrinated into gendered lifestyles that objectify and dehumanize them, thereby robbing them of their basic human right to live full and unencumbered lives,” the same could be said of Smith’s characters (2). Mrs. Rommely is a perfect example of that same phenomenon happening beyond U.S. borders. Mrs. Rommely comes to America with preconceived notions about how wives are supposed to act and how much abuse they must endure.

Sissy Rommely, Francie’s most favored aunt and Mary’s eldest, faces the reputation of a “girl gone wrong” who, at ten years old, was “as fully developed as a woman of thirty” (Smith 60). Her rapidly developing body is characterized as the catalyst that set off “all the boys [being] after Sissy and Sissy [being] after all the boys” and her mother deciding “that marriage was the best thing that could happen to her highly sexed daughter” (Smith 61, 62). A month after her first marriage, Sissy gave birth to a baby that died in the womb, the first of many to leave the world before entering it. This loss changed her--“she worked harder at keeping her house spotless and clean. She became even more thoughtful of her mother. She stopped being a tomboy...As she quieted down, she seemed younger and more childlike” (Smith 62-3). Losing her first baby prompts Sissy to double-down on the so-called “woman’s work” within her life, like cleaning, caring for others, and channeling femininity. Additionally, she associates her “tomboy” behavior with the tragedy of losing her child, as if exuding masculinity could be directly linked to the

death of her baby. Similarly to her mother, Sissy assumes that she must have done something wrong or sinful to cause her suffering. Following the first child's death, Sissy married other men then left them after "nothing but death grew out of their love-making," before eventually resolving to just not marry them anymore (Smith 63).

After a slew of men and attempts at motherhood, Sissy eventually secretly adopts a baby, prompting Francie to ask about the "strong sweet perfume" people would talk about her aunt using to find men. Francie decides "'that this using strong perfume is tied up somehow with a woman wanting a baby and wanting to find a man who can give her a baby and look after it and her too.' She put that nugget of knowledge away with all the others that she was continually collecting" (Smith 315). Throughout her girlhood, Francie looks to her Aunt Sissy as an example of what to do, in addition to what not to do.

Katie Nolan, Francie's mother, bears the brunt of responsibility within the family's household, before and after Johnny's untimely death. She maintains work, cooks, cleans, manages the family's finances, and handles almost all other caretaking. However, she preaches patriarchal views regarding the role of women. When discussing a local man with a dying wife to Johnny in front of Francie, she proclaims "I hope she dies and dies soon...So that he can marry again—marry a cheerful healthy woman who'll give him children that can live. That's every good man's right" (Smith 184). Later, while talking to her daughter she criticizes women who expect the fathers of their children to be around during childbirth, stating:

they want them to hear every moan and groan and see every drop of blood and hear every tear of flesh. What is this twisted pleasure they get out of making the man suffer along with them? They seem to be taking revenge because God made them women...A man thinks of the pain and agony that came to her out of their being together and then it isn't

good anymore to him. That's why many men start being unfaithful after the baby. (Smith 333)

Time and time again, Katie blames women for the troubles they endure, consistently tying them to acts of the body. She looks down on women who want the fathers of their babies to witness the agony of childbirth. Katie finds women who behave this way to be selfish and deserving of infidelity; the men who cheat are not bad guys, their girlfriends and wives drive them to it. She teaches Francie that women who cannot have babies do not deserve "good" men. Additionally, she teaches her that women should do what is necessary to shield their men from suffering, even if it means experiencing agonizing pain alone and without their partner's support.

Katie did not just preach these beliefs; she also practiced her misogynistic beliefs with her children. Throughout their childhood, Katie takes every opportunity to give her son Neely a leg up over her daughter. When times get tough, she encourages Francie to quit school and get a job, despite her pleas to stay in school. Meanwhile, Neely, who wants to quit school is forced to continue his studies. Upon realizing that only one child can go to school while the other continues work, she pressures Neely about pursuing his education to become a doctor, a dream of hers, before declaring that "Francie will fight and manage to get back somehow" (Smith 383). Katie works against her daughter's wishes to ensure that her son has every opportunity to be successful and fulfill her dreams for him. Katie's disregard for Francie's aspirations in favor of Neely sends a message to Francie. This makes her feel less than him, especially in the eyes of her mother.

Gender Norms and Community Enforcement

Both Mick and Francie interact with their community outside their families that confront internal and external forms of gender bias who police their own ability to express themselves. In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Mick encounters other children outside of her household who struggle to reconcile their gender identity with the expectations imposed upon them. Baby Wilson, through the influence of her mother, embodies traditional femininity in every way imaginable for someone her age. From Mick's perspective, Baby "[looks] like a fairy or something in the picture show . . . she was all pink and white and gold—and so small and clean that it almost hurt to watch" (McCullers 164-65). Children are awestruck by Baby. Gleeson-White astutely observes that, "representations of ideal femininity in McCullers' novels stress petiteness, thus setting up femininity as a kind of arrested development, a stuntedness and child-like powerlessness" (112). Baby is just that, a mere infant, yet she radiates femininity with her pink frilly dresses, luxurious hair, and delicate dance moves. The other children admire the most traditionally feminine characteristics Baby possesses; they are either captivated by her or envious of her.

From Baby's perspective, her performance of femininity directly correlates to her mother, Lucile's influence. Lucile encourages Baby to want elaborate hairstyles and to not eat supper, along with other inappropriate behaviors for a child of four-years-old. Further complicating Baby's relationship with gender expression, Lucile states, "I feel like I got to push Baby all I can. Because the sooner she gets started on her career the better it'll be for both of us" (McCullers 126). Baby, a mere toddler perceived by her mother as a meal ticket, is being forced to grow up too fast. Mick's older sister, Etta, buys into the same ideological influences as Baby and her mother. They all look to films and other popular culture for quintessential examples of female

beauty, hoping to join their ranks through obsessing over their appearances. Hazel, Etta, and Baby begin laboring for their beauty, giving over their time to primping and practicing. Lucile performs labor for her daughter's beauty and provides the physical means (makeup, clothing, accessories, etc.) Baby needs to maintain it. They have all been pushed to believe that attaining beauty is the role of women and that being beautiful will open doors for them.

Adults within Mick's world demonstrate desires that deviate from normative gender expression without the possibility of fully acting upon them. After Biff Brannon, the local diner owner, becomes a widower, he begins to allow himself to express the femininity he has long repressed. Once Biff begins living alone, he allows himself to indulge in activities traditionally marked as feminine, like using a lemon rinse, wearing perfume, and revamping his apartment. As the novel progresses, Biff finds the courage to extend his performances of femininity beyond his body and home. Biff begins to take any opportunity to be a caregiver for his niece Baby, often happily stepping in when her mother is overwhelmed. As the frequency of these opportunities increase, Gary Richards states that Biff:

fantasizes about adopting children, in no small part so to secure an outlet for his creativity in designing and making girls' clothes . . . During such daydreams, although Biff is usually careful to define himself as these imagined children's father, he at times so wants to perform these roles supposedly relegated only to women that he will transsexualize himself. (189)

Biff attempts to mask his desires by masculinizing them, becoming the father rather than the mother he would prefer to be. He has been taught to believe he cannot be feminine, or both feminine and masculine, because a narrow or limited gender expression must match assigned sex. Biff recognizes the ridiculousness of gender norms by stating:

And on that subject why was it that the smartest people mostly missed that point? By nature all people are of both sexes. So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means. The proof? Real youth and old age. Because often old men's voices grow high and reedy and they take on a mincing walk. And old women sometimes grow fat and their voices get rough and deep and they grow dark little mustaches. And he even proved it himself—the part of him that sometimes almost wished he was a mother. (McCullers 132)

He cannot understand why all people are not able to claim both masculinity and femininity when they naturally achieve and embody both during their lifetime. Mick exemplifies Biff's idea of "real youth" prior to social expectations clamping down on her. Early in the novel, Mick feels empowered by her youth, feeling as though she can exist outside of gender norms and do whatever she wants regardless of what her sisters or anyone else says. It is only as she is propelled into adulthood by employment that she begins to feel that she can only be feminine.

Meanwhile in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, Francie observes other young women experiencing the social consequences of existing within a patriarchal world, a hierarchy that allows boys and men to walk away from sexual or reproductive scandal unscathed. When Francie's neighbor Joanna gets pregnant and is not demoralized by the situation, not only is she attacked in the street by local women, but her boyfriend's mother and sisters convince him to abandon her. The women in his immediate family tell him:

Don't be a fool...She's no good. Her whole family's no good. Besides, how do you know you're the one? If she had you she had others. Oh, women are tricky. We know. We are women...If you must marry, marry a good girl, one who won't sleep with you without the priest saying the words that make it right. If you marry this girl, you are no longer my

son; you are no longer our brother... You'll never be sure the child is yours... Oh, yes my son, our brother, that is how women do. (Smith 234)

Francie witnesses the results of women working to turn men against other women through emotional manipulation. They deem the sexual relationship to be entirely the woman's fault, labeling her as morally corrupt for being willing, while maintaining their son/brother's innocence. He is supposed to desire sex, but any inkling of sexual desire on the part of a woman is reprehensible. Furthermore, the women take their position as members of the same sex and proclaim to "know" what motivates other women to "trick" men like him. They eventually help him leave town, untouched by the new life created, while Joanna literally gets stoned in the street. The misogynistic nature of this situation is reflected in Francie's reaction to it. Francie decides that she not only hates women, but "she feared them for their devious ways, she mistrusted their instincts. She began to hate them for their disloyalty and their cruelty to each other" (Smith 235). The hateful behavior she observes in these older women festers inside of her and reproduces itself. Francie does not walk around treating other women in such overtly cruel ways, yet on the inside she hates women for how women treat each other.

When Francie begins working in a newspaper office as a proofreader, she witnesses another instance of a woman being punished for an "inappropriate" intimate relationship while her male partner faces no social consequence. One day in the restroom, Francie hears a rumor that Miss Armstrong, the highest ranked reader, is "the boss's mistress" (Smith 376). This gossip disrupts Francie's previous opinion of Miss Armstrong. Francie projects her own ideas of what a woman who gets involved with a married man experiences. She ponders what it means to be a mistress, "she examined Miss Armstrong closely as a mistress. She saw that Miss Armstrong wasn't pretty... 'Beautiful legs, then, is the secret of being a mistress'" (Smith 376). But her

pondering ends there. She decides that being a mistress must be wrapped up in one attractive feature. When the boss announces that he is to marry Miss Armstrong, “Francie’s conception of a mistress broke and scattered. She had believed that men never married their mistresses—that they cast them aside like worn-out gloves” (Smith 379). She assumes that Miss Armstrong as a mistress deserves to be tossed aside, rather than married, because she asserted her sexuality. No other woman in the office considers the inappropriate behavior on their boss’s part. No one considers that it takes two people to have a sexual relationship. Francie does not indicate where she got this “worn-out glove” idea from, but the term itself speaks volumes. Comparing any woman to a vessel, “worn-out” or not, obviously dehumanizes her.

Sexuality, Violence, and Victim Blaming

Unfortunately, Francie is no stranger to being dehumanized. Both Francie and Mick face varying degrees of gender-based violence, each with differing attitudes to its cause and degree of probability. While Mick is seemingly aware of the threat of sexual violence, she shrugs off the any possibility of facing it herself, deeming it to be something only some girls worry about. Meanwhile, Francie experiences three separate instances of sexual assault. Although their experiences are not entirely similar in nature, each girl faces a sense of shame that results in them wishing to feel like a child again. Their sexual experiences, consensual or not, facilitate further alienation, causing them to feel unsure of their sexualities as well as their roles within the male gaze.

Upon turning thirteen, Francie experiences sudden sexualization in places she would not have expected. She and Neely spend their childhoods excitedly selling whatever “junk” they can get their hands on to a local shop in exchange for candy money. Francie notices at an early age that Carney, the shopkeeper pinches young girls but leaves the boys alone. A few months after officially becoming a teen, she writes in her diary, “Carney did not pinch my cheek today. He pinched something else. I guess I’m getting too big to sell junk” (Smith 242). Without hesitation, she blames her own developing body for the assault, never even realizing it was assault (on a minor, no less).

A year later, hysteria floods the neighborhood, a predator is kidnapping, raping, and killing little girls as young as six. Unfortunately, Francie comes home from school confronted by this man waiting in her building’s hallway. Katie saves Francie from the same fate of his previous victims by shooting him. Although Francie does not get raped and killed, the man had exposed himself while waiting for her to come home, and he manages to touch her before Katie

saves the day. Francie cries out to her mother and father wanting her leg to be cut off remembering where he touched her. Katie responds to her anguish by telling Johnny, “That’s too bad it had to happen to her...she’s such a one for remembering. She might never get married, remembering” (Smith 256). This response “it had to happen to her” from Katie both acknowledges how common this sort of trauma is for girls, while simultaneously pointing to how this event will impact her ability to be someone’s wife. Katie is not worried that Francie may never feel comfortable with a man or her sexuality, but rather that she will not be willing to commit her life to one.

After venturing out to New York City for work, Francie again faces sexual assault, this time with an even more damaging response from a woman in her life. A man on her commute train puts his hands on her one day: “she stood in desperate futility, helplessly enduring the indignity. She could have called out and protested but she was too ashamed to call public attention to her predicament” (Smith 377). Upon telling her Aunt Sissy about it, “expecting that Sissy would comfort her. But her aunt treated it as a great joke” (Smith 378). Sissy doubles down on this attitude by remarking that she herself must be getting old because no one has done this to her in years. She informs Francie that “it means you’re getting a good shape and there are some men who can’t resist a woman’s shape...There was a time when I couldn’t ride in a crowd without coming home black and blue” (Smith 378). Sissy frames the attack as a compliment to Francie, a compliment she wished was still paid to her.

Unfortunately, Sissy is perpetuating what we now call rape culture by displacing the blame on the victim of sexual harassment or assault and insinuating that the need for preventative measures outweighs the importance of the crime. Kate Harding sums it up best in *The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture--and What We Can Do about It*, stating “Men, we tell

ourselves, are bumbling, sex-obsessed fools who can barely speak their own native languages when they come within ten feet of a pretty lady. Women, meanwhile, are...utterly unreasonable to expect respect from people with boners” (14). Sissy naturalizes the experience and presents it as common, expected, and not worth harping on. At first Francie is horrified before blaming herself for criticizing her aunt that has always been good to her. Her aunt teaches her not only to see being groped as a good thing, but to expect it because some men simply cannot control themselves around attractive women. She misplaces accountability/agency in the situation, blaming the “good shape” of Francie’s body. Francie invited the strange man to touch her by simply existing within a desirable body. Sissy suggests to Francie that she begin carrying around a needle and stand with a free hand on the train to be able to jab any men who touch her. The incident ends with Francie declaring, “Oh, I wish I was young again when everything seemed so wonderful!” momentarily forgetting what was happening to girls as young as six-years-old just a few years earlier (Smith 379).

The frequency of these incidents is not surprising to anyone involved or informed of them. Yet with each incident something changes, the blame shifts closer to Francie’s side. Her body causes these things to happen, not the men’s perversion. For most of Francie’s youth, these incidents are the basis of her understanding of sex and male-female relationships. When the local rapist-murderer attacks Francie, it is just after she begins to feel curious about sex and ask her mother questions. In fact, when Katie gives her the sex talk and answers her questions, she decides that she is “luckier than most children...she never needed to slink into dark hallways with other girls and exchange guilty confidences. She never had to learn things in a distorted way” (Smith 249). However, there is nothing lucky about being assaulted on a regular basis and

having the women in your life either blame you or consider how it will impact your marriage prospects.

Mick Kelly proves to be lucky in comparison to Francie, although never getting to have an open and frank conversation with her mother, or another trusted adult, about sex. Mick experiences sex with Harry, without really learning anything, other than “how it was” (McCullers 274). It is unclear what prior knowledge Mick brings to the experience however the quickness and confusion that surround the experience imply that she knew little. In fact, the pair seem to understand so little about sex that the topic of consent does not come up at all. The act of having sex with Harry seems to just happen to Mick. The pair are reclining on the ground together and suddenly, “she felt him trembling and her fists were tight enough to crack. ‘Oh, God, he kept saying over and over. It was like her head was broke off from her body and thrown away...And then this was the way. This was how it was” (McCullers 274). In Catherine Martin’s essay, “Speech, Silence and Female Adolescence in Carson McCullers’ *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop*,” Martin asserts that “this description suggests that she is no longer a thinking subject, but a passive body, subject to the activity of others” (Martin 8). By having this, essentially non-consensual, non-pleasurable experience, Mick becomes detached from any semblance of her sexuality before it even becomes a fully-formed piece of herself. She returns home feeling “very old . . . like something was heavy inside her. She was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be or not” (McCullers 276). Mick feels exponentially changed by what happens, without reflecting on how it made her feel, whether she enjoyed it, or even intended for it to happen.

She continues to feel disconnected from herself. In “Understanding Sexual Politics and the #MeToo Movement through the Fiction of Carson McCullers,” Graham-Bertolini argues,

“Mick’s fear that others can ‘see’ that she has had sex indicates how very concerned she is with how others perceive her. This sudden concern with her reputation signals a reduction of her self-confidence and agency. For assurance of her lovability, Mick turns to her younger brother Bubber/George...For the first time we see Mick gauging her worth through the eyes of a male” (Graham-Bertolini 10). Her internal dialogue is rattled to such an extent that the change she imagined would happen after having sex subconsciously manifests itself. Most notably, she looks at her friend John Singer in a different light; she feels ashamed of her desire to spend time with him. Even worse, “she could not stay in the inside room,” where she wrote music, reimagined symphonies, and fantasized about the rest of her life. Her mind, or as she calls it “the inside room,” where she made plans and dreamed of her future self has been disrupted.

Both Francie and Mick find themselves existing within the bounds of purity culture, a social reform movement, supposedly designed to protect them. According to Mary Celeste Kearny, in their essay “Coalescing: The Development of Girls’ Studies,” the late nineteenth century saw a drastic shift in public interest regarding the lives and sexualities of young girls. Kearny states that this interest stemmed from rapid “industrialization and urbanization” and more young girls journeying out into the world for educational opportunities and work (Kearny 7). In the essay Kearny further argues:

[these interactions] led to considerable public discourse about the effects these “modern girls” might have on the traditional way of life...In addition to developing preventative educational programs meant to dissuade female youth from prostitution and premarital sex, women reformers lobbied for laws that would increase the age of consent to the late teen years (Odem 1995). Interestingly, while these laws were meant to alleviate men’s sexual exploitation of female youth, they also elided girls’ sexual agency by presenting

them as innocent, vulnerable, and in need of protection. During the Progressive era, the focus of women's purity reform shifted to girls' sexual delinquency, a situation that both facilitated public acknowledgment of girls' sexuality and contributed to greater adult control of female youth. (Kearny 7)

The same laws and social conversations meant to protect girls facilitated the damaging misogyny among women and girls that informed how they perceived their own gender identity and sexuality, as well as how they treated others of their gender. The access to education and work opportunities girls like Francie and Mick had during the early twentieth century facilitated the independence they longed for, while opening them up to gender-specific forms of violence, both physical and social. Girls like both of these protagonists would have been exposed to those "preventative educational programs" that taught them not about how to understand their own sexuality, but how their sexuality was a threat to themselves and everyone around them. Their sexualities became open for public debate, while nothing changed for their male peers. At least in the United States, this historical moment can be directly traced to what is now commonly referred to as "slut-shaming."

Francie experiences numerous incidents of assault, while also navigating the fear of being labeled delinquent for her sexuality. Mick, on the other hand, faces guilt, confusion, and a general misunderstanding of her sexuality that results in a traumatic first sexual encounter. A slew of critics have noted how Mick's sexual encounter with Harry "forces Mick to realize that to be female is to be somehow shameful and obscene" (Perry 43). Despite proclaiming to not believe in any God, Mick is faced with talk of a "terrible sin" and "adultery" by Harry (McCullers 275). He asks if they should get married and decides to leave when she declines his proposal, leaving her to feel rejected and alone as she navigates her feelings. Even if she does not

care about sins or commandments, she is aware that because Harry believes what he did to be a “moral wrong” then he must leave (McCullers 248). Mick may not feel like a delinquent for having sex, but she goes home feeling worse about what it means to be a female beyond her interior world.

Citing Mick and Francie’s sexuality is crucial to highlighting how young girls during McCullers’ and Smiths’ lives would have found their gender identity inextricably linked to sex as an activity. When Catherine MacKinnon sought to parse out the relationship between Marxism and feminism, MacKinnon concluded that:

If the literature on sex roles and the investigations of particular issues are read in light of each other, each element of the female *gender* stereotype is revealed as, in fact, *sexual*. Vulnerability means the appearance/reality of easy sexual access; passivity means receptibility and disabled resistance, enforced by trained physical weakness; softness means pregnability by something hard...Socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms...Gender socialization is the process through which women come to identify themselves as sexual beings, as beings that exist for men. It is this process through which women internalize (make their own) a male image of their sexuality *as* their identity as women (Meyers and MacKinnon 71).

In essence MacKinnon found that the final push for internalized misogyny and a male-centered view for girls and women comes from their relationship with heterosexual sex. Girls and women are conditioned to decenter themselves in favor of the male-gaze, not just for sexual attention, but to pair protection with the vulnerability and softness they have been conditioned to cultivate. Sexuality plays a key role in the vicious cycle of females being coerced into making themselves

feminine and delicate before inevitably ending up in a situation where those qualities facilitate male attention and violence. Mick may be fighting against femininity, but she still believes that putting on a silk gown or taking her clothes off will give her the attention she seeks from Harry. Meanwhile, Francie faces constant sexual violence with the women in her family downplaying her trauma while placing value on the men involved. These experiences compounded with their narrow-minded views of how womanhood works leads to an unhealthy, disjointed understanding of their own identities.

Although McKinnon's ideas are compatible with Mick and Francie's experiences, a great deal of progress has been made within the fields of gender studies, transgender studies, and queer theory that challenge McKinnon's strict notion of women all being socialized as sexual objects. Despite this progress, there is value in highlighting how the experiences of women and girls like Mick and Francie led to McKinnon's limiting theory. Many scholars approaching McCuller's work from a queer perspective have pointed out how the author challenged the limited notions of femininity and gender norms by having Biff feel empowered by expressing his femininity. Bearing that in mind, it is crucial to note that Mick is not given the same treatment. Biff Brannon is afforded a great deal more privilege as a white adult male business owner. Unlike many others, Biff's free time and space of employment is entirely under his dominion. He does not have to dress or act a certain way to remain employed. No one is checking in on his apartment to make sure it is masculine enough. His privilege provides him with the space and privacy that further empower his ability to express himself.

Laboring for Femininity and Labor

Shifting focus to the impact of labor, the most significant commonalities between these two young female protagonists fully crystalize. In the chapter of *Contemporary Feminist Theory*, titled “The Economy, Work and Money,” Mary F. Rogers names four forms of labor: productive (or paid), reproductive, maintenance, and unwaged. Rogers defines reproductive labor as “the efforts invested in raising one or more members of the next generation to adulthood” (Rogers 243). Maintenance labor is defined by Rogers as the necessary chores one must perform to “maintain oneself,” carefully noting that for many women this extends to “any other adult(s) one serves in the broad, pervasive way” (Rogers 243). And unwaged labor is loosely defined as the “work of consumers” (as in acting as a customer, client, patient, etc.) (Rogers 244). Rogers’ discussion of these forms of labor highlights how women are disproportionately affected by the unequal distribution of all non-productive labor. This discussion fails to acknowledge the burdens placed upon girls, like Francie and Mick, who are expected to begin performing a version of reproductive labor as well as maintenance labor for younger siblings out of sheer necessity. Both girls are expected to care for their younger siblings. Mick keeps an eye on Bubber and Ralph, often taking them out in the wagon or watching them from the front porch. Although Mick’s family had Portia to help with the younger children, she still had to share the burden of giving up her time to look after them. Francie, on the other hand, “had to mind Neely” throughout her childhood, with the earliest mention occurring when she was four years old and he three years old (Smith 105-6). For both, unpaid labor begins long before they reach working age.

Unlike most of their (white) peers, Mick and Francie go to work at the age of fourteen, under the guise of being old enough. According to *Women in the United States, 1830-1945*, only

24.2% of women over the age of sixteen were employed (Kleinberg 105). Only 25.8% of women over fifteen-years-old were “gainfully employed” by 1940 (Kleinberg 208). Within those small percentages, most working women were people of color, not married, or immigrants.

Additionally, during both periods, opportunities were severely limited, with jobs like nurses, teachers, secretaries, and positions at all-female factories as their main options. It is crucial to note that Mick and Francie’s whiteness was key to their ability find opportunities.

Long before taking on any employment Mick demonstrates an awareness of gender bias within employment. Mick tells Harry, “A boy has a better advantage like that than a girl. I mean a boy can usually get some part-time job that don’t take out of school and leaves him time for other things. But there’s not jobs like that for girls. When a girl wants a job she has to quit school and work full time. I’d sure like to earn a couple of bucks a week like you do, but there’s just not any way” (McCullers 246). She feels jealous of Harry for his job at the New York Café and the freedom he enjoys from having money and free time while still getting to go to school. Mick recognizes that because of his gender, Harry has far more opportunities for work than she ever will. She sees his job as more of an extra-curricular activity than his main responsibility.

When Mick decides to get her first job as a clerk at Woolworth’s, a large department store, to help alleviate the family’s financial struggle, the experience begins to deepen her understanding of how class and gender intersect. The morning of her job interview her sisters “loaned her the clothes to wear and primped her to look nice. She wore Hazel’s green silk dress and a green hat and high-heeled pumps with silk stockings. They fixed her face with rouge and lipstick and plucked her eyebrows. She looked at least sixteen years old when they were finished” (McCullers 318). Again, she links hyper-femininity with age, in addition to class. She and her sisters try to cloak their family’s financial situation in delicate fabrics, makeup, and

accessories. Additionally, Mick and her sisters are participating in Rogers' "unwaged labor" through collecting these items. These objects could easily be seen as frivolous in the face of their family's dire financial need, and yet the sisters recognize how they function as cultural capital. They understand that Mick must perform a higher-class status and the most highly regarded version of her gender identity to put her best foot forward within the workforce.

Shortly after starting work, Mick finds that work makes her feel frustrated and alienated from herself, and yet she still finds a way to put herself in opposition to other girls. She lays awake at night contemplating her circumstances, thinking "what the hell good was it. All the plans she had made, and the music. When all that came of it was this trap—the store, then home to sleep, and back at the store again" (McCullers 350). She stumbles to the New York Café after work, feeling defeated, removing "the dangling green earrings...she had bought the earrings the week before—and also a silver bangle bracelet" (McCullers 351). In this moment sitting at the café, Mick also considers her worn out heels and silk stockings. She weighs her options, thinking that "unless she was the kind of common girl that would wear cotton stockings," she will have to figure something out (McCullers 352). Even as she sits, wishing she did not have to work for her family's sake, she dismisses the idea of clothing she associates with the "common girl." The girl who once refused to wear dresses in favor of shorts is buying costume jewelry, feeling trapped by the weight of her new life, still hoping to not be like other girls. She has given up the clothing and hobbies that made her feel like herself, but her dislike for other girls remains. Mick has become one of the girls, like her sisters, who expresses their gender in a way that aligns with social expectations. Mick has begun to labor for her beauty, and she has begun to police other girls. Not dissimilar to how her sisters once judged her choices, Mick is beginning to use class and physical appearance to judge and dismiss other girls and women. She once dreamed of using

her talent-earned wealth as a composer to defy gender norms and wear whatever masculine clothing. Now she looks down on those who fail to perform femininity to her standards.

Nancy B. Rich contends that by this final scene Mick has not changed at all, stating “judged by her actions, Mick is selfish, dishonest, and prejudiced” before declaring “intellectually and morally, Mick never matures” (116-7). This reading ignores that at the novel’s beginning and end she is still a child, as only a year and a half has lapsed. Mick is still a girl trying to make sense of growing up, getting a job, and digesting the world outside of her family’s home. Moreover, this reading ignores the sexual trauma and emotional trauma Mick has faced, especially in light of her finding a close friend’s dead body weeks before the final scene. Rich’s reading also ignores the large-scale ideologies influencing Mick’s behavior. Mick is a product of her world, through and through—prejudices and all.

Unlike Smith, McCullers does provide a glimpse into how those who do not enjoy the privileges of whiteness experience gender. Portia, the Kelly family’s domestic worker, exists within a racial and gender paradigm that forces a more complex system of judgment and dismissal towards other women. She works incredibly hard to provide the Kelly family and their boarders with meals and a clean place to lay their head at night, while still being treated as lesser by almost all those recipients of her domestic labor. Within her personal life she boasts about the arrangement she has with her husband and brother, in which they all contribute to maintain their lifestyle. Although she is happy to have, what her father calls, a “co-operative plan” with the men in her life, she still centers her gender when describing her circumstances and praising the stability she experiences (McCullers 73). When telling Bubber and Mick about her grandfather and uncle’s farm, she declares “that is the various reason why I’m a whole lot more fortunate than most colored girls” (McCullers 47). She considers all the ways her male elders have worked

to own land and build rooms for their families, thinking of herself as lucky to be a woman within this family of accomplished Black men. She does not consider the ways any women in her family would have made that house a home. Portia gives no credit to the aunts, mothers, and daughters who also provided their labor to those efforts. Not dissimilar to Mick, Portia has been indoctrinated into internalized misogyny, placing more value on the efforts of men than women regardless of their equal contributions.

Francie's first bout of employment as a "stemmer" in an assembly line style factory, leads her to the same feelings of frustration experienced by Mick. On her first day, she ponders how, "This could be a whole life...You work eight hours a day covering wires to earn money to buy food and to pay for a place to sleep so that you can keep living to come back to cover more wires" (Smith 362). She then considers "some of these girls will marry; marry men who have the same kind of life. What will they gain? They'll gain someone to hold conversations within the few hours at night between work and sleep" (Smith 362). Francie immediately realizes what it means to be a worker who works to live rather than lives and works. She understands that going to work and having a person to interact with while at home can be a "whole life," but she is not excited by this idea. Instead of thinking of those married men and women as living in marital bliss, she feels they just fill time together between meeting their basic needs and working. Moreover, her experiences of living in poverty influence her understanding of working women who marry. She does not consider how some of her peers will be able to quit working if they marry a man who can afford for them to be housewives—this is not the first time her class status will dictate her understanding of employment.

Following a layoff, Francie begins working for the Model Press Clipping Bureau as a proofreader where her hatred for other women does not do her any favors. Although she turns

out to be the fastest reader she is “the poorest paid...Since [she] never became friendly enough with the girls to be taken into their confidence, she had no way of knowing how grossly underpaid she was” (Smith 373-4). She becomes so accustomed to keeping to herself instead of befriending the girls around her that she misses an opportunity to earn the money her work is worth. Francie’s strong distrust and overall disgust with other women and girls keeps her from developing beneficial relationships with her peers and uniting with them against their common enemies.

Conclusion

McCullers and Smith's novels function as sites of social reproduction that demonstrate how girls are socialized into misogyny, fabricating a view of themselves through a patriarchal lens that leaves them alienated from their own sense of gender identity. Despite all their depictions of misogynistic microaggressions and parents reinforcing patriarchal power, these novels shine a light on experiences often underrepresented in literature, especially for the first half of the twentieth-century. Mick Kelly and Francie Nolan stumble through adolescence trying to reconcile their own desires and feelings with the expectations closing in on them. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* highlight how labor—laboring for beauty, maintenance, reproduction, and wages—weighs down on girls long before they age into so-called womanhood. It is through Mick and Francie's small acts of rebellion and moments of questioning that these novels emerge as feminist texts.

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn is often overlooked by scholars because it is labeled "young adult fiction" while *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is studied in college classrooms and declared literary. Smith's novel deserves just as much critical attention when it comes to conversations surrounding gender, sexuality, and labor as McCullers' novel. They both depict the unique struggle of being a girl, constantly receiving damaging messages and having to work to unpack and unlearn them. Centering the experiences of girls was an inherently feminist thing for Smith and McCullers to do, especially during a period when girls were still being left out of most feminist discussions.

As girls' studies continues to evolve it is crucial that materialist feminism is part of the conversation. For girls like Francie and Mick their families' financial situations left them in a position even further from that of women fighting for the opportunity to be more than a wife and

mother. Girls living in poverty were fighting for their right to education within family structures that required their domestic labor and greatly benefitted from their sacrifices. Mary Celeste Kearney asserts, “Children were singled out in such feminist rhetoric because it was widely believed during the late nineteenth century (as it is today) that youth were not mature, rational, and experienced enough to handle the responsibilities of adulthood and thus citizenship” (9). The feminists leading those charges could not have been more wrong about girls like Mick and Francie. Francie and Mick had the struggles of growing up and the weight of their families’ poverty on their shoulders forcing them into a level of maturity beyond their years.

The value of returning to novels like these published in different regions of the country, within three years of each other, over eighty years ago, comes from realizing how little has changed and what conversations have been overlooked. A great deal of the same struggles that afflicted McCullers and Smith when they were working on their manuscripts have remained. Rape culture is not just school-aged girls being told tank tops will distract their male peers and male teachers, or girls being taught to always carry their car keys in hand—it is something that can be found in coming-of-age novels set almost a century ago. Slut-shaming is not just something that occurs among young women of the same age, it can cross generations, classes, races, and it can be found in the pages of so many important works of literature. And internalized misogyny does not begin in adulthood, it begins in childhood, and as evidenced by McCullers’ and Smith’s novel is integral to telling the story of young girls coming to terms with their gender identity and deciding how they feel comfortable expressing it.

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Vita

The author grew up in Luling, Louisiana. She received her B.A. in English from the University of New Orleans in 2019. One year later, she returned to the University of New Orleans to pursue a M.A. in English, concentrating in American literature.