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# Redefining the Gothic: How the Works of Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams & Flannery O'Connor Retained Gothic Roots and Shaped the Southern Gothic

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**REDEFINING THE GOTHIC:  
HOW THE WORKS OF CARSON MCCULLERS,  
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS & FLANNERY O'CONNOR  
RETAINED GOTHIC ROOTS AND SHAPED THE SOUTHERN GOTHIC**

by

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## Introduction

For as long as people have been able to write, they have looked to the written word to help them express joy, fear, anger, excitement, regret and sadness. Whether it be reading the works of others or authoring their own stories, the answers to life's questions often lay in the pages of fiction. People turn to literature because they can often relate to the characters and feel that their own struggles or obstacles are not theirs alone. Even if it's fantasy, reading a work that allows a person to not feel isolated can be therapeutic in many ways; but, for some writers there is not always a literary place to which they can relate. Their own real lives have aspects that cannot be found in literature. A genre that speaks to them does not yet exist. This is exactly what happened for writers like Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams and Flannery O'Connor. Their fictional characters took on the very often autobiographical features and characteristics of the writers themselves, but there was no literary haven for them. There were connections between them as writers, but those connections would not be discovered until their works were already published. Only then would the American public see what these three authors really had in common: a link to literature of the past with a new twist that would create a genre all its own.

Most critics would agree that these authors have a strong connection to each other. McCullers, Williams and O'Connor are writers who don't fit into other "preassembled" literary groups. For these three writers in particular, the literary elements present in the twentieth-century literature which was considered "mainstream" and studied as part of the American canon (such as F. Scott

Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* or John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*) didn't suit their needs. Instead, the gothic elements that had been established in Europe centuries before and had eventually made their way to the American East Coast and into the pages of Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Faulkner, seemed to have more to offer writers like McCullers, Williams and O'Connor. Yet something still wasn't quite right. The gothic genre spoke of characters who felt isolated and who were often overwrought with emotion, and it appealed to female writers like McCullers and O'Connor who wanted to write about women who were ultimately subservient to dominant males. In addition, the Gothic's settings in castles or ancient tombs and spooky monasteries, and the presence of ghosts, omens, and prophecies didn't fit the Southern writers who were looking for something else. The answer, then, would be to alter the gothic elements enough so that they fit a new Southern American backdrop, but still maintained the remnants and threads of classic Gothic literature that had attracted these literary misfits in the first place.

My aim in this thesis is to explore the commonalities between Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams and Flannery O'Connor, particularly in terms of three main themes: isolation, the pervasion of American normalcy and gender roles. While each of these authors clearly inserts some autobiographical information into his or her characters, the real commonalities between the fictional characters can be found in their inability to fit into a traditional society; the characters in all three authors' works are outcasts, pushed to the fringes of their communities or their families because of who they are. Sometimes these

characters' desire to be different is intentional; other times it is not. Each author has succeeded in altering the traditional roles of men and women, and has shown how relationships are often marred by dominant men. They have each maintained a writing style that is inherently Gothic in nature, but they have also altered the traditional genre's elements just enough so as to create a new sub-genre which would become known as Southern Gothic. This study will ultimately show how McCullers, Williams and O'Connor essentially – and perhaps unintentionally – created something new for American literature which has now become one of the most fascinating and widely-studied genres in the American literary canon.

In order to understand how or why the traditional Gothic genre attracted modern Southern American writers, however, it is first crucial to discuss the importance and scope of Gothic literature in more general terms.

### **Gothic Literature: An Introduction**

The genre of Gothic literature was not an American creation; rather, the history of Gothic fiction really begins in Europe in the eighteenth century. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* is widely believed to be the first Gothic novel, originally published on Christmas Day 1764 (Hogel 21). The piece was a definite detour from the traditional Romantic writing of eighteenth-century Europe. E.J. Cleary, in his essay "The Genesis of Gothic Fiction" writes of Walpole's work: "The preface puts forward an elaborate counterfeit origin for the text, presenting it as an Italian work printed in 1529 and speculating that it may have been written between 1095 and 1243, at the same time of the Crusades, when the story is set" (Hogel 21). Cleary goes on to explain that the word "Gothic" actually is not

mentioned in Walpole's work or in his discussion of it. It was only when Walpole published a second edition in April 1765 and confessed that it was in fact a modern concoction that the word *Gothic* was added to the title, and it was called *The Castle of Otranto: a Gothic Story*. What bothered critics at the time was the question of how a modern author could write a Gothic tale. The term "Gothic" had initially been reserved only for works written much earlier than Walpole's work. According to Clery, the term "Gothic" signified "anything obsolete, old-fashioned or outlandish" (Hogel 21). While *The Castle of Otranto* was set in what would later become the "typical" Gothic setting (it opens with a wedding ceremony being haunted by an ancient prophesy), the term "Gothic" didn't accommodate what the text itself was accomplishing. Consequently, the term "Gothic" was ignored for a number of years. There was simply no place for the grotesque in writing – or at least it seemed that way. According to Hogel, this was because readers at the time were not interested in the imaginary – especially when that imaginary was horrific. If people were going to fantasize while reading, it was going to be about happily-ended love stories or a knight in shining armor. People didn't want to read about creepy, ugly monsters. Instead, they wanted blonde-haired princesses who were swept away by handsome men on horseback. When *The Castle of Otranto* was presented, it was what Hogel calls "an outright challenge to this orthodoxy" (23); the story took the ideas of traditional Romantic and Victorian love stories and turned them completely upside-down.

Walpole's *Castle* did what few, if any, pieces had done before: transform the romance story into something darker and more psychologically thrilling. The

story includes a number of elements which are now considered standard Gothic elements. Alan Lloyd-Smith, in his book, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction* identifies these elements, or tropes, as “the city as labyrinth; the imprisoned maiden/femme fatale motif [and] the wasteland wilderness” (1). However, Gothic fiction includes much more. There are often mad scientists, darkness, abandoned homes or castles, stormy weather scenes, lost loves, shadows and ashen figures. The Gothic, according to Lloyd-Smith, is “a return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself” (1). In addition, the characters of Gothic literature are often confused or tangled in webs of psychological terror – they are often mad or unconscious of their extreme behavior. By these standards, there are hundreds of modern texts which could be considered Gothic tales. Even Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* could fit inside the Gothic frame next to classics like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Telltale Heart,” Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Bram Stoker’s original *Dracula*, or William Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.” Classic Gothic literature also set the stage for today’s modern horror stories. The psychological thrillers written by authors such as Steven King and Anne Rice are not so far removed from Gothic origins themselves, and in fact, some authors even consider modern horror stories a legitimate sub-genre of Gothic because of the shared characteristics between the older stories and their modern-day descendants. Lloyd-Smith acknowledges that “strict interpreters of the Gothic as a genre would agree ... that the true period of Gothic ... was from

about 1764 to 1824,” but he also notes that the term now has “a much broader application and popular understanding, and has been used to describe texts ranging from *Wuthering Heights* ... to William Gibson’s *Neuromancer* or ‘Buffy the Vampire Slayer’” (4).

What was happening in the world during the eighteenth century may have also been a factor in the emergence of the Gothic genre. A number of world events, including both the French and American Revolutions, were quite terrifying to the everyday family. These revolutions were occurring more frequently than on just the battlefields, however. A renaissance of literature was beginning to take shape as well. Lloyd-Smith notes that the similarities between early American Gothic pieces and English Gothic tales are not surprising; the first Americans to write Gothic literature were still living an essentially British-style life in the newly-formed America. Lloyd-Smith writes, “American writers were effectively still a part of the British culture, working in an English language domain and exposed, both intellectually and in terms of their marketplace, to British models” (3). Lloyd-Smith, however, also exposes some crucial differences between English and American Gothic.

Though early American writers were indeed influenced by their European counterparts, those American authors who decided to venture into the Gothic realm did so under their own terms. Though the American Gothic did find its base in history, it veered from its European lineage by focusing instead on society’s problems and American culture’s anxieties. According to Teresa A. Goddu, author of the essay “American Gothic,” slavery and racial issues in America

became one of the primary topics of the genre. She writes, “the spectre of slavery often inhabits Gothic texts, conjuring forth how American Gothic’s psychological and physical terror and its racialised [sic] narratives of darkness are grounded in the everyday realities of chattel slavery ... the Gothic becomes the mode through which to speak what often remains unspeakable within the American national narrative – the crime of slavery” (63). The author also talks about Poe’s “The Black Cat,” in which the ghosts of slavery haunt America’s most cherished domestic institution – the home. In many cases, it is the idea of slavery that manifests itself in traditional Gothic tropes – the American family is haunted by the former slaves on a plantation or a character is lonely and isolated after the American Civil War and falls in love with a “Yankee” who is thought to be unfit as a suitor. The shadows of American history haunt the pages of the American Gothic in ways which the European Gothic never understood.

In addition to racial themes, the American Gothic also shifted the settings of the stories. While European Gothic stories took place primarily in the wilderness, American Gothic writers moved their characters from ancient stone buildings with arches and crypts to the underground hallways of haunted monasteries or American churches; instead of using ancient castles, American authors used farmhouses, plantations, libraries or bed chambers. For example, Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper* features a woman who is locked in an old mansion’s attic to recover from what her husband believes is “melancholia,” and in Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado,” the victim is locked in the catacombs under a wine vineyard after his enemy seeks revenge and lures him

to his death with the promise of fine wine. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* is another example. Goddu writes, "[Hawthorne's story] traces the family's illicit wealth both to their violent usurpation of Native American land and to their appropriation of the working-class labor of the 'blackened' Maule family, thereby exposing how the nation was built upon the stolen labour and property of racialised [sic] others" (63). For Goddu, the biggest difference between the European Gothic and the newly-formed American Gothic is the focus on race. The disparities between "black and white" in America set the tone for a new type of Gothic that would be much different from its European ancestors.

Furthermore, rather than the women being driven mad in the mountains of Italy, American Gothic protagonists found themselves going mad in the dark and dangerous woods of the Northeast. These changes were an intentional split from the European Gothic which allowed American writers to first express themselves in settings which were much more unique to the American landscape, and second, relate to audiences who would have found little personal connection to the Italian Alps or English castles they had never seen before. Furthermore, the renowned Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts from 1692-1693 helped set the stage for American readers to be interested in witches and the supernatural. Fear of the Devil overtaking Puritan towns and villages did not disappear with the conclusion of the Trials, and in some areas, that fear continued for generations. For many East-coast writers, the common people's fear of Satan and evil beings allowed writers to take advantage of audiences who would be easily susceptible to the

desire to read about frightening settings, possessed characters and spirits that haunted farmhouses, abandoned monasteries and dilapidated mansions.

During the beginning decades of the twentieth century, a revival of Gothic architecture, as well as the beginnings of the development of horror films (a silent horror film titled “The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari” was produced in 1919; Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein became a major motion picture in 1931), worked as a catalyst to propel the genre now known as Gothic literature to the literary forefront. Though often seen as dark and depressing by readers, Gothic literature, according to Lloyd-Smith, is actually much more about morals and values than darkness and depression. He writes, “Hallmarks of the Gothic include a pushing toward extremeness and excess, and that, of course, implies an investigation of limits. In exploring extremes, whether of cruelty, rapacity and fear, or passion and sexual degradation, the Gothic tends to reinforce, if only in a novel’s final pages, culturally prescribed doctrines of morality and propriety” (5). The author also notes that the characters found in American Gothic stories are often free-thinking characters who are up to no good. In many cases, their prey are innocent folks who put their trust in someone who is later found to be untrustworthy. Like the American detective novel, somewhat invented by Edgar Allan Poe, American Gothic stories “explore chaos and wrongdoing in a movement toward the ultimate restitution of order and convention” (5). E.J. Clery puts it another way in his essay: “Moral messages would be useless if not joined to compelling narratives that stirred the emotions of the reader” (Clery 23). As the genre of American Gothic became more popular, it’s clear that it was not just the message of the

pieces, but the strong narrative that accompanied that message which drew readers to the pages time and time again.

Eric Savoy, in his essay “The Rise of American Gothic” says that in general, Gothic “embodies and gives voice to the dark nightmare that is the underside of ‘the American dream.’ This formulation is true up to a point, for it reveals the limitations of American faith in social and material progress.” For Savoy, the Gothic genre is about “distinctive and dark American obsessions” (Savoy 167). Certainly this claim holds true for Williams, McCullers and O’Connor. Each of their works showcases characters who have had their own dreams of a better life in America crushed by their inability to fit in. In many cases, what caused the characters to be pushed to the fringes of society was their social stigma as “monsters,” though the type of “monster” shifted from traditional Gothic tales to their modern counterparts. The traditional Gothic stories (both European and early American) featured monsters who were created in labs or who were severely physically deformed. Consider H.P. Lovecraft’s “The Shadow Over Innsmouth” (1936), described by author Kelly Hurley in the essay, “Abject and Grotesque.” Hurley describes the bus driver of “Innsmouth” as having “gill-like creases running down the sides of his neck, scaly grey-blue skin, a narrow head, watery-blue eyes that seemed never to wink, a flat nose, a receding forehead and chin, and singularly underdeveloped ears” (Hurley 137). Characters like this often scared readers into thinking something was lurking in the night. But the American Gothic monsters in the pages of McCullers, Williams and O’Connor weren’t fictional monsters that were the product of a gross imagination; instead, they were

more natural – they were hideous, but were, nonetheless, human. Writers like McCullers and O’Connor created human characters who were repugnant – either physically (like Joy in O’Connor’s “Good Country People”) or because of their abrasive personalities (like Spiro Antonapoulos in McCullers’ *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*) – but none were literal monsters.

The experience for the reader is similar, then, for a detective novel and a Gothic piece: there is an anxiety about the unknown, the suspense of wondering what will happen to the protagonist(s), and a problem that is often not resolved until the final pages. Reading an English *Sherlock Holmes* story can often prompt the same reaction in a reader as Henry James’ ghost story *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). It is that reaction that perhaps called out to writers like Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams and Flannery O’Connor. By altering the settings of their stories to the American South and varying the traditional roles of men and women, yet still clinging to some of the basic tenets of American Gothic, a new genre was born – the American Southern Gothic.

### **The American Southern Gothic: An Introduction**

As the American Gothic genre flourished in America, there became a need for some writers to tailor the genre into even smaller pieces. Analysis of the writing of McCullers, Williams and O’Connor would say that they were likely drawn to the classical Gothic genre because of its themes, treatment of women, atmospheres of mystery and suspense and its characters who were often distraught or distressed. But how did authors like Williams, McCullers and O’Connor come

together to create the Southern Gothic genre themselves? Their common attraction to what is considered “the grotesque” in writing allowed them to use elements of Gothic fiction in new and modern ways, but it wasn’t until their works were studied by critics and commentators that the links between the writing became more clear. Those links were what essentially established the Southern Gothic – a twentieth century, Southern twist to the Gothic style that had been around for centuries.

There are three main components which I would like to discuss in this thesis: the sense of isolation present for the characters in each work, these characters’ rejection of or struggle for a sense of American normalcy, and the gender issues which can be debilitating for so many of them. The works of McCullers, Williams and O’Connor each feature protagonists who struggle with their American identity. They are not the traditional males and females, and they do not fit into the “standard” social box of American normalcy. Their marriages and relationships are strained, their jobs – if they even hold one – are insecure; the choices they make are often misguided and turn out to be “wrong.” For many of the Southern Gothic characters, the setting is hot and humid, but the lives of the characters are cold and lonely. For Williams’, McCullers’ and O’Connor’s characters specifically, there is a constant struggle against what society deems “normal.” A person’s gender, according to those around the characters, should be representative of the inner self; biology alone should be enough to accurately represent how a particular character feels, acts or thinks. But the characters created by McCullers, Williams and O’Connor often feel a mismatch or a

disconnect between biological or physical gender and the stereotypical characteristics that accompany it. Women are masculine, men are feminine. Both genders struggle with their sexuality in ways that are traditionally “un-American” and “immoral.” Some experiment sexually with others of the same gender; others dress like the opposite sex.

Furthermore, the roles for each gender are often reversed: many female characters use foul language and obscenities which are stereotypically associated with males; male characters take on the role of “wife” in their relationships as they become the nurturing, gentle spouse to a sometimes abusive man to whom they are sexually connected. These characters aren’t allowed to pursue the American dream in the same way as more “normal” characters because they don’t fit the mold of a person who is *allowed* to pursue the Dream in traditional ways. The characters stray from the traditional roles of men and women, and it is this deviation that plays an important part in how these characters’ relationships are defined and developed.

The roles of men and women were fairly well situated in the traditional American Gothic genre: women were generally driven to madness or to commit crimes, either because of the actions of men or because of unrequited loves who drove them to insanity and violence. (Picture Emily Grierson’s quiet and secretive poisoning of Homer Barron in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily.”) In the Southern Gothic tradition, the roles are sometimes reversed, and it is the *men* who are driven to insanity or criminal activity – in many cases, because of a woman. Sexual and/or physical abuse and sometimes even rape are woven into the plots of

the Southern gothic. For Tennessee Williams, the women are often battered by their chauvinistic husbands; in one case, the husband is driven to such madness over his wife that he screams and cries out the open window to her as she leaves – and in turn creates one of the most famous scenes in American literary, and eventually, film history. In O'Connor's story, it is the female protagonist who incites The Misfit, a male prison escapee, to murder her and her family. In another O'Connor tale, the female is set up as brainy and worldly, but her intelligence is ultimately no match for the conman who sexually assaults her, steals from her and leaves her isolated and vulnerable in the hayloft of the family barn.

Though the characters in the works of McCullers, Williams and O'Connor experience many of the same challenges, the delivery of the stories' messages is very different for each author. For McCullers, who was only 23-years old when her best-selling novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* was published, the struggles of young women in poor Southern towns were featured in novels and short stories that initially shocked many American readers and came under intense scrutiny by critics. Williams' characters were brought to life on the stage. His stories were more than fiction; they were dramatic events. Williams didn't write novels, poems or short stories. He wrote scripts, meant to be acted out by real people on real stages – and they caused real reactions from the audience. O'Connor's use of the short story to engage many of her own Irish-Catholic family's beliefs was a significant detour from the traditional American short story. These three writers each engaged in writing which was essentially un-patriotic; their words turned the idea of the American Dream into something of a nightmare for their characters.

Their writing took a genre of writing which was already unconventional and pushed the envelope with it. As Lloyd-Smith said earlier, Gothic's goal was to push literature to the limits; in some aspects, Southern Gothic's goal was then to push these limits even further.

It is my intention to take Savoy's claims a step further and argue that the Southern Gothic genre is the epitome of the American Dream turned upside-down – a sort of extension of the original ideas found in European Gothic literature, but with its own Southern American flare. The Southern Gothic maintains many originally gothic elements, but twists them in ways which are not always expected by the reader; however, though unexpected, there is still enough connection between the original genre and the newly created subgenre for readers to see a definite resemblance between the works of McCullers, Williams and O'Connor, and Poe, Hawthorne and Faulkner.

First, the characters in Southern Gothic novels, plays and/or short stories very often feel isolated, lonely and afraid. In European Gothic and early American Gothic pieces, this is often the case as well; however, the isolation and loneliness is approached a bit differently. While traditional Gothic stories include characters who are physically isolated, Southern Gothic pieces feature characters who merely *feel* as if they're alone. Take for example Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven." The narrator sits alone in a chamber, pining over his lost Lenore. Outside, a cold December night blows a black raven through the open window and onto the doorframe, where he torments the narrator to insanity with his repeated "Nevermore." The setting – as well as the narrator himself – is dark, cold and

isolated; mirror this to Carson McCullers' Mick Kelly or Frankie Addams. Both girls feel alone and overwhelmed by the world around them, yet neither character is actually ever physically alone; in fact, throughout each of their respective stories, the girls are surrounded by family, friends, housekeepers, neighbors and townspeople. The settings are also rarely dark and/or cold. Set in the American South, the opposite is almost always the case – the days are hot and humid, the nights calm and cool. Characters are not shown in woolen coats and frozen boots, but rather in shorts, T-shirts and tennis shoes.

In addition, because so much of the gothic genre centers around the theme of isolation, the tone of the language used in both traditional pieces as well as the newer Southern Gothic is very comparable. The terminology used in traditional Gothic pieces (of both European and American origin) is often carried through to the writings of the Southern Gothic authors. Words like *afraid* – *alone* – *frightened* – *isolated* – *astonished* – *afflicted* – *apprehensive* – *furios* – *frantic* – *hopeless* – are all frequently included in Southern Gothic writing. Though these words are in a different context, they nonetheless appear and form a connection to their Gothic ancestors. In addition, the presence of monsters is still a part of the Southern Gothic stories. Though the characters aren't monsters in a traditional Gothic sense – i.e. they are not inhuman species created in a lab or hideous beasts who live in a tower – there are both male and female characters who are monsters in their own right.

Traditional Gothic writing usually creates an air of mystery or suspense for the readers. This is no different than twentieth century Southern Gothic

writing. Though the suspense is different in the sense that it is not about waiting to see what monster lies in the darkness, the readers of McCullers, Williams and O'Connor often find themselves wanting to know what is about to happen to the protagonist. In many cases, the character struggles with sexuality and identity; the readers' questions for the author center around the character's ability to find happiness or inclusion into a larger society that is in many cases excluding those who wish for nothing more than to belong to something larger than themselves.

Secondly, McCullers, Williams and O'Connor present characters in each of their works who find themselves separated from standards of what one might consider social American norms. They have dysfunctional families, trouble with substance abuse, violent and abusive relationships, unorthodox religious views and sexual preferences which are contradictory to what most readers in the mid-1900s would have viewed as socially acceptable. Some have multiple partners; others admit to actually loathing the very people with whom they've chosen to spend their married lives. These characters are bewildered by their own circumstances, and though they may want the traditional idea of the American Dream, they frequently find that it is just out of reach. For the women of these stories, the idea of a "Southern Belle" is lost and often replaced by a desire to rebel against the polite society to which they belong. For these characters, location is not relevant to their circumstances – being a Southerner does not make them what should be inherently Southern.

Third and finally, traditional Gothic tales tend to focus on male dominance and female subservience. Women are often driven to madness by male characters

who do not love them or who force them into committing crimes. This theme is clearly not forgotten in the works of modern Southern Gothic authors, though the characters created for this new sub-genre are typically not pining over the typical lover. For example, Emily Grierson of Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" pines for a Northern man, a laborer who comes to town to work on the rebuilding of Jefferson County, Mississippi. The attraction doesn't seem farfetched to readers, but in the Southern Gothic works, the characters are often attracted to members of the same sex or to men who abuse them. In some cases, the readers have difficulty understanding the attraction and question the author's intent in creating characters who seek love from such unconventional mates.

In many of the cases presented in this thesis, women are driven to do things that seem unforgivable – or at least questionable. Many are left alone, never gaining the attention of the one they love (whether it be a male or female target) and some are, like their Gothic ancestors, driven to madness, often at the hands of men. Some turn to violence and crime; others are the victims of it. Some find themselves simply left alone, wondering if a rescuer will ever appear. There are even cases of males who are not stereotypically masculine being left alone and/or pining for someone they cannot have. Though biologically male, they often take on the traditionally Gothic characteristics of forgotten women – emotionally charged, lost, and isolated characters who yearn for the affection of another.

McCullers, Williams and O'Connor looked for a literary genre which would welcome social outcasts who don't pursue the traditional and stereotypical relationships of America in the mid 1900s. When it didn't exist, however, they

sought to branch out and nonetheless write about what they felt inside themselves, whether it be a lack of social acceptance, a lack of faith, the search for a lover's forgiveness, or a search for grace and redemption. When there wasn't a place for non-traditional Gothic writers, they created one, and eventually, the Southern Gothic became a refuge and haven for weary writers who had struggled against the mainstream and floundered as "traditional" American writers.

## Chapter 1

## Non-Traditional Gender Roles &amp; Relationships in Carson McCullers'

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*

While Carson McCullers has become a popular reading choice for leisurely American fiction readers, even experiencing what some say is a resurgence in the last ten to twenty years, she is rarely an author who is included in academic studies of general American fiction; in many cases, there doesn't seem to be room for her in English 101 classes. She often is pushed aside for the more traditional "greats" – authors such as Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mark Twain, Harper Lee, William Faulkner or John Steinbeck. However, in examining the more specific southern gothic genre, it would be difficult to leave McCullers out of the discussion. Writing her most famous novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, before her twenty-fourth birthday made her a literary sensation, and her work to this day often takes readers on a powerful journey through the lives of characters who experience loneliness, isolation, social awkwardness and the darkest recesses of the human condition.

It is not a coincidence that McCullers chose to focus on gender issues in many of her works. She wrote the majority of her work during the 1940s and 1950s, a period when women were in a unique position, torn between their traditional roles as housewives and mothers and the allure of the workplace. As millions of men enlisted in the Armed Forces for World War II, women became responsible for the American jobs that needed to get done. Though men had previously performed the jobs of shoe salesmen, bank tellers and aircraft

mechanics, women now found themselves earning their keep through out-of-the-home jobs. Women were lured to the workplace with advertisements that showed jobs as glamorous places where outside appearances didn't necessarily matter, though women were still thought to be beautiful and feminine underneath the dirt and grime of the workplace. The dichotomy of masculine expectations in the workplace coupled with feminine expectations in the home created a somewhat confusing time for women who didn't know exactly where they fit. In her book, *Tomboys: A Literary and Cultural History*, author Michelle Ann Abate opens her chapter about Carson McCullers with some keen observations about the shifting role of women in the era of World War II. She writes:

Whereas the Depression era had insisted that a woman's place was as a feminine wife and mother in the home, the war years asserted that during this time of national crisis, she served best as a tomboyish worker in a factory ... Indeed, with a bandana tied around her head, a fierce look in her eye and a muscular arm punctuating her assertion "We Can Do It," wartime icon Rosie the Riveter is perhaps the most enduring image of the tomboyish roughness that was being asked of the nation's women. (145-146)

Add to this the fact that many women were exploring non-traditional sexual roles (including lesbianism, polygamy, and bisexuality) in a time when traditional marriage roles were still preferred by the majority of American society. McCullers herself struggled with her own sexuality, claiming that she considered herself to be "an invert" and saying that she was "born a man" (Gleeson 2).

Perhaps it was her own sexual confusion that drew her to a style of writing that was reminiscent of the traditional Gothic genre. William Faulkner had published "A Rose for Emily" in 1930, and the piece was considered to be one of

the first of the newly emerging subcategory that would eventually be called Southern Gothic fiction. It wouldn't be until other stories with similar Southern themes, characters and settings were compared to works like "A Rose for Emily," however, that the term "Southern Gothic" would be recognized by critics and scholars. In "A Rose for Emily," a woman struggles with finding love, so much so that she ultimately kills the only man she has ever loved in order to keep him from leaving her. The story revolves around Emily's desire to please her father and the townspeople of Faulkner's fictional city, Jefferson, Mississippi. Emily's need to be viewed by her community as feminine by partaking in a traditional marital role with Homer Barron drives her to commit the murder. To the residents of Jefferson, things appear to be normal; it is only the readers who begin to understand Emily's loneliness and frustration with her inability to hold on to the only male suitor who seems interested in her. These themes of lost love, lack of femininity and a desire to be socially "normal" carry through to later Southern Gothic pieces as well. But perhaps more importantly, it is the idea of history coming back to haunt the characters of a post-Gothic era which most separates the Southern Gothic from its dark and creepy ancestry. Author Teresa A. Goddu points out that these themes of lost love, a recurring history, loneliness, and a desire for social normalcy appear in classic works like Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of Seven Gables* and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, as well as in Toni Morrison's more modern novel, *Beloved*.

In Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the protagonist, Mick Kelly, is an adolescent girl who faces the loss of her innocence, a struggle with

her own sexuality, and the dilemmas of adult life. The novel's setting is Georgia, a state that in many ways was behind the socially-evolving northern regions in which women were becoming more independent – especially when it came to sex and femininity. For a Georgia girl to be sexually explicit and unfeminine would have made her a freak; being a freak made her perfect for the American Gothic genre which welcomed both the fictional freaks living in the pages of the novels as well as the social outcast authors who created them. However, McCullers certainly didn't want to write within the parameters of the traditional Gothic setting of a castle, and her style didn't desire the presence (in some cases) of a monster or a ghost of a long-dead loved one. The existence of omens and prophecies, foul weather, and isolated, haunted mansions wouldn't be appropriate for McCullers' story of a young woman struggling with her identity; these elements of the traditional Gothic writing would have to be altered to fit a more Southern American style. The details of the settings and characters would have to change, but the themes could stay the same. A character who was physically isolated in a traditional Gothic tale could evolve into one who was emotionally isolated – like Mick Kelly – in the budding Southern Gothic genre.

In the introduction to her book *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*, author Sarah Gleeson-White writes that Carson McCullers' work typifies both the Southern Renaissance as well as the dark and grotesque landscape of American gothic fiction. Gleeson-White says, "Like Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, McCullers's 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). These “misfits” are absolutely seen in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, through Mick’s character primarily, but through many of the male characters as well.

When the readers first meet Mick, she is introduced by McCullers as being “A gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve ... [who] stood looking in the doorway. She was dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes – so that at first glance she was like a very young boy” (McCullers 16). In addition, other characters often refer to Mick and remember her because of her boyishness; in other words, if Mick was to look like every other girl in town, few would recall her uniqueness. The owner of the local restaurant, Biff Bannon, remembers Mick’s “hoarse, boyish voice” and her “swaggering like a cowboy” (McCullers 17). He even recalls telling his wife that “he did like freaks” (17) and feels that it is part of the reason he is intrigued by Mick. From early on in the novel, McCullers slyly asks her readers to see a lack of gender normalcy as being equal to freakishness. It is not just Bannon who notices Mick’s lack of femininity. Portia Copeland, a Negro woman who works for the Kellys, tells Mick’s father, “Mick, now – ‘she a real case. Not a soul know how to manage that child. She just as biggity and head-strong as she can be. Something going on in her all the time. I haves a funny feeling about that child. It seem to me that one of these days she going to really surprise somebody. But whether that going to be a good surprise or a bad surprise I just don’t know. Mick puzzle me sometimes” (McCullers 73).

This foreshadowing of the “surprises” that surround Mick is just one of McCullers’ hints that Mick is a special character who will drive the novel in directions the reader may not always anticipate. Furthermore, Portia recognizes the lack of femininity Mick expresses, saying at one point to Mick, “You hard and tough as cowhide” (McCullers 44).

As Mick spends her days roaming around the neighborhood, she smokes cigarettes and climbs onto the roof of a local house which is under construction. It is while she sits on the roof that she decides that by the time she is famous at the age of 17, she will write only her initials, M.K., on everything. She thinks to herself that, “She would have M.K. written in red on her handkerchiefs and underclothes. Maybe she would be a great inventor. She would invent little tiny radios the size of a green pea that people could carry around and stick in their ears...” (McCullers 30). Her desire to use only her initials sends a clear message to the readers: Mick Kelly doesn’t want to be identifiable as male or female by her signature. As Michelle-Ann Abate notes, this action by Mick reflects Carson McCullers’ decision to sound neither male or female by name alone. Abate writes that McCullers, who was born Lula Carson Smith, “repudiated the model of the Southern Belle and instead tramped through the woods, rode horses, and climbed trees” (152). Furthermore, Mick’s desire to invent gadgets and gizmos that are traditionally more masculine, coupled with her lack of interest in stereotypically more feminine toys like dolls or tea sets shows her as a clear deviation from the more “girly” characters who were being celebrated in mid 1900s American literature.

Take for example the fact that Nancy Drew novels hit the shelves in 1930 originally (although the latter of the 34 novels was published in the 1970s). Nancy ultimately became one of the most well-known female characters in contemporary American literary history, but even with her “male-oriented” job as a detective, she was still feminine in the way she dressed, spoke and acted. It wasn’t just Nancy Drew who was in the forefront of femininity. Americans who turned on the television found Mrs. Cleaver (of *Leave it to Beaver*, 1957-1963), Margaret Anderson (of *Father Knows Best*, 1954-1958), Donna Stone (of *The Donna Reed Show*, 1958-1966) and Harriet Nelson (of *Ozzie and Harriet*, 1952-1966). All of these women were mothers who ran their households while wearing skirts and pearls. Voices were never raised and all problems were solved within a thirty-minute episode. These women cooked, cleaned and had dinner on the table when their all-knowing husbands arrived home from work (Rich 1).

These 1950s television women are a drastic contrast to the women of McCullers’ novels, in which the female protagonist is more reminiscent of women like Annie Oakley, portrayed in *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950), or *Calamity Jane* (1953). As McCullers describes Mick’s high school experiences, she notes that Mick got special permission to take courses like mechanical shop (88). It is at this point that the reader begins to wonder if Mick herself notices how different she is from other girls her age, but McCullers clears up any confusion rather quickly, noting that Mick is bothered by the fact that she doesn’t seem to fit in. She writes, “In the halls, the people would walk up and down together and everybody seemed to belong to some special bunch. Within a week or two she knew people in the

halls and in classes to speak to them – but that was all. She wasn't a member of any bunch" (89). McCullers goes on to explain that Mick thought about being a part of a group "almost as much as she thought about music. Those two things were in her head all the time" (89). The readers can infer that Mick's inability to fit in with other kids may be due in part to her lack of a real connection to her female gender, and that her lack of belonging is something which really bothers her.

It is at this point in the story that Mick decides to take action to resolve her social problems. She throws a party at her parents' home, inviting a number of kids, both male and female, from her high school. In order to fit the mold of female social normalcy, she decides to dress the part of a young woman at a formal party. She borrows a dress from her sister and admits that she looks beautiful, but in typical Mick fashion, she says that she doesn't feel "like herself at all. She was somebody different from Mick Kelly entirely" (91).

About halfway through the novel, Mick sleeps with George/Bubber, a character whom the neighborhood kids call "Baby-Killer Kelly." They sleep together on Christmas Eve, and as Bubber lies in the dark, silent, Mick says to him, "Quit acting so peculiar. 'Less talk about the wise men and the way the children in Holland put out their wooden shoes instead of hanging up their stockings'" (McCullers 153). Mick's attitude toward sex has been tarnished, perhaps because she has not had a traditional group of female friends and/or role models who explain to her that sex is supposed to be something special and reserved for one whom she loves. For Mick, sex is purely physical – an act that

people do with little to no emotional attachment. It is partially because of this that she now underestimates the more traditional ideas of sex to which most Southern ladies would adhere. Mick doesn't see the act as something to be shared between two married people, something most Southern Belles would certainly believe. It should be noted that at this point in the novel particularly, Mick is a true representation of McCullers herself, who was not only known for her penchant to smoke three packs of cigarettes a day and drink whisky morning, noon and night, but also for her lifelong, loveless relationship to her husband Reeves. According to some in McCullers' social circle, it was well-known that both McCullers and Reeves were gay, and so though they were married (twice), they each engaged in several extramarital affairs and rarely, if ever, slept together. The idea of sex as a sacred act was an idea to which McCullers herself didn't adhere, so it makes sense that the fictional Mick wouldn't feel it was important either. After Mick and Bubber have sex, Bubber remains silent, refusing to talk to Mick and instead goes to sleep. In the morning, she wakes the rest of the family. Presents are exchanged, and she and Bubber spend a mostly silent day together before each quietly returning to their own rooms. The incident is never again mentioned.

Most who read *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* immediately notice the tomboyishness of Mick – a role that is stereotypically freakish for a young woman in 1940, the date of the book's original publication – especially when this boyishness is held up against the expectations of an ideal Southern Belle. As Gleeson-White writes, “The female adolescent is even more ‘grotesque’ than her adult counterpart: not only is she female, but she is in the liminal state between

childhood and adulthood and, in the case of Mick..., between femininity and masculinity” (12). Gleeson-White goes on to say that Mick Kelly challenges the notion of the discrete female identity. Women might indeed be sexual beings, but to write about it or discuss it breaks social mores long held sacred by Southern society.

In fact, Mick comments on these Southern Belles, noticing how she is so unlike them herself. Her two sisters, Etta and Hazel, both pursue femininity, at times even aggressively and in ways that seem downright silly, while Mick concurrently rejects it. Mick notices that Etta is preoccupied with making it to Hollywood and getting into the movies. The first time the readers meet Etta, the impression is much different than that of meeting Mick. McCullers introduces Etta as “sitting in the chair by the window, painting her toenails with the red polish. Her hair was done up in steel rollers and there was a white dab of face cream on a little place under her chin where a pimple had come out” (36). Mick notices how girly she is as well, noting:

[Etta] primped all the day long. And that was the bad part. Etta wasn't naturally pretty like Hazel. The main thing was that she didn't have any chin. She would pull at her jaw and go through a lot of chin exercises she had read in a movie book. She was always looking at her side profile in the mirror and trying to keep her mouth set in a certain way. But it didn't do any good. Sometimes Etta would hold her face with her hands and cry in the night about it. (McCullers 36)

As this section of the novel evolves, Etta voices her displeasure with Mick, saying that seeing her in boys' clothes makes her sick, but it is Mick who stands her ground, openly admitting, “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. That's why I wear shorts. I'd rather be a boy any day, and I wish I could move in with [my brother] Bill" (McCullers 37).

Clearly, McCullers has set Mick up as a character struggling with her sexuality and identity. Mick is well aware that she is biologically female, but doesn't feel that way emotionally or even physically. Perhaps it is not just the fictional Mick who feels this way; Carson McCullers may have very well felt this way herself.

In the September 1999 issue of *American Literature*, Rachel Adams wrote an article focused on the sexuality and gender issues found in McCullers' fiction. Titled "A Mixture of Delicious and Freak: The Queer Fiction of Carson McCullers," the article tells of the struggles McCullers herself dealt with over the years. In fact, the very opening of the article sets up McCullers' gender-based quandary. Adams tells of a trip McCullers took in 1963 to the "Deep South," a region the author had visited many times. However, this trip was different as it would be one of McCullers' last before her death at age 47. Adams tells the story of McCullers' meeting with a then-26-year-old man named Gordon Langley Hall at a party. After the party, after viewing Hall intently, McCullers pulled him aside and said, "You're really a little girl." Years later, doctors determined that McCullers had been right. Hall had been born a female. Adams writes:

Classified as a transsexual, Gordon Langley Hall underwent gender reassignment surgery to become Dawn Pepita Hall. She subsequently married her black butler, John-Paul Simmons, and gave birth to a daughter. In a 1971 interview, Hall-Simmons credited McCullers with giving her the courage to acknowledge what were at that time very unconventional desires: "Carson, her senses sharpened by her own affliction, saw me for what I was in a moment of truth and her heart went out to me. I was a freak, yes, a freak, like one of her own characters." (551)

The “affliction” to which Hall-Simmons refers is more than likely McCullers’ own sexual struggles – her attraction to both men and women and her desire to have triangulated affairs rather than traditional male-female, monogamous relationships, despite being married to Reeves McCullers. Adams, however, takes the claim a step further, saying that McCullers’ role as an author – a creator – of freaks in her novels, gave her even more insight into and an ability to recognize *real* people who struggled with their sexual identity.

McCullers’ fictional characters often struggle with loneliness and feelings of isolation. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, even young Mick recognizes the marginality she feels. While sitting on the steps of her parents’ home one evening, she notes, “It was funny, too, how lonesome a person could be in a crowded house” (McCullers 47). In many cases throughout the novel, Mick finds herself alone, only comforted by the sounds of Mozart in her imagination (though she does sometimes find a neighbor who is playing music and comforts herself by sitting under an open window to listen).

The loneliness of characters is also exacerbated by McCullers’ use of the word “queer” throughout her novels. In the majority of her works, McCullers uses the word in a number of different ways, both to express the word’s original lexiconic meaning as “odd” or “strange;” but Adams further explores McCullers’ use of the word, concluding that McCullers used the word on purpose to set off whatever she was referring to from the normalcy of traditional social behaviors. Adams writes, “The queer refers loosely to acts and desires that confound the notion of a normative heterosexuality as well as to the homosexuality that is its

abject byproduct” (552). She goes on to write how it is the characters’ unwillingness to conform to societal norms that ultimately causes them to suffer: “Freaks and queers suffer because they cannot be assimilated into the dominant social order, yet their presence highlights the excesses, contradictions and incoherences at the very heart of that order” (Adams 552). Abate also discusses McCullers’ use of the word, explaining that “the term first emerged in the sixteenth century as an adjective to refer to entities or events that were ‘strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric’” but in light of the growing homosexual community in the 1920s, “it came to denote a specific type: nonheteronormative sexual activity, especially male homosexuality” (160). In fact, Abate frequently cites the work of Adams, thus showing that studies of McCullers’ use of the term are not reserved for a small number of literary critics. Because of McCullers’ own sexual orientation and actions which could be deemed “queer,” many authors who study and write about the Southern Gothic genre and the work of Carson McCullers choose to focus on the word and its use in McCullers’ work.

It is not just the use of the word “queer” though that McCullers weaves throughout her novels. She also chooses to focus on the tomboyishness and sexuality of her characters. Mick Kelly’s tomboy story parallels a subplot surrounding the relationship between the mute, John Singer, and his partner Spiro Antonapoulos, a prime example of a non-traditional relationship and/or gender role. Though they are, in most cases, referred to as “friends” in the novel, it should be clear to most readers that McCullers has tied them together in a relationship that is much deeper than simple friendship, even though it may often seem one-sided.

Antonapoulos, always referred to only by last name (as Singer is, too), is cruel and rude to Singer, though Singer clearly loves him. Singer is attentive, loving and kind toward Antonapoulos, so much so that when Antonapoulos is sent to an insane asylum for three months, Singer vows to wait for him.

As the men prepare for Antonapoulos' departure, it is Singer who takes on the "wifely" role. McCullers writes, "[Singer] talked and talked. And although his hands never paused to rest, he could not tell all that he had to say. He wanted to talk to Antonapoulos of all the thoughts that had ever been in his mind and heart, but there was not time..." (9). In addition to his desire to talk to Antonapoulos as much as possible before it is too late, it is Singer who also packs their joint possessions into the suitcase. The men "walked arm in arm down the street for the last time together" (9), though Antonapoulos doesn't seem moved by Singer's attention to him or his clear sadness over their forced separation. As Singer waits for the time he and Antonapoulos can be together again, he stays at the Kelly's house. It is then that the storylines between Singer and Mick first cross.

Mick is drawn to Singer because of his quiet attentiveness to her and the other tenants in the house. Singer frequently draws the attention of those who are struggling with the darkness of their own lives. Jake Blount and Dr. Copeland (Portia's father) both find solace in talking to Singer, even though he can never verbally respond. Though many of the characters who pass through the Kelly's home see Singer as a special person on whom they can rely and with whom they can share their fears and worries, Antonapoulos is still seemingly unaware of his friend's special qualities. When Singer leaves in July to visit Antonapoulos, he

does so quickly and quietly, making sure to fulfill his responsibilities to Mrs. Kelly. He leaves four dollars for rent in an envelope for her and his room is left clean and bare. His leaving causes a quiet disappointment throughout the house as McCullers writes that “when his visitors came and saw this empty room they went away with hurt surprise. No one could imagine why he had left like this” (80). Singer, though, is well aware of his own reasons for leaving: he spends his entire summer vacation visiting Antonapoulos in the asylum.

Like a wife who has awaited a long-planned visit with her husband, Singer “imagined about each moment they would have together” (McCullers 80), but McCullers shows how

Antonapoulos is not at all acting the part of the would-be husband, anxious to see his “wife.” When Singer arrives, bearing gifts of a dressing gown, bedroom slippers and two monogrammed nightshirts (again, all typically traditional spouse-to-spouse gifts), Antonapoulos only glances beneath all the tissue paper, looking for something good to eat. When he finds nothing to satisfy his appetite, he “dumped the gifts disdainfully on his bed and did not bother with them any more” (McCullers 80). Singer doesn’t seem to notice, however, and vows to spend the summer with his friend, even if he can only visit the asylum on Thursdays and Sundays. McCullers writes that Singer spends the days he cannot be with Antonapoulos just walking up and down the halls of the hotel at which he is staying. Later, she notes that his second visit to the asylum is much like the first – Antonapoulos pays little attention to Singer’s attentiveness or willingness to give him a pleasant break from the monotony and gloom of the asylum. Even when

Singer gets special permission to take Antonapoulos out for a few hours, there is still no sign of appreciation for the gesture, even though Singer “planned each detail of the little excursion in advance” (McCullers 81) and went to great lengths to treat Antonapoulos to something special. They go out to eat (Antonapoulos’ favorite thing to do), but Antonapoulos does not so much as acknowledge Singer’s kindness or efforts, an attitude that causes “the end of their little excursion [to make] Singer very sad” (82). As he leaves the asylum to return to the Kellys’ house, McCullers’ omniscient narrator tells readers that unlike Antonapoulos, who seemed to dread Singer’s visits, the residents of the house are anxious to have him return, “for they felt that the mute would always understand whatever they wanted to say to him. And maybe even more than that” (82).

In his book *Cotton’s Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936-1938*, author Michael P. Bibler makes an observation about William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and Tennessee Williams’s *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* that can be aptly applied to the relationship between Singer and Antonapoulos as well. Bibler writes, “Where representations of homosexual relations are overt, they sometimes take on competing forms, whereby some modes of contact or attraction appear mutual, equitable and loving, and others appear exploitative or even coerced” (6). While these descriptions seem to apply to human relationships in general, in reading *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, it is often frustrating for those who form a reader-character fondness for Singer; the readers are left with little reason to like Singer and Antonapoulos’ relationship at all, and it has, quite frankly, nothing to do with whether or not the

relationship is a homosexual one and rather everything to do with the way that Singer is treated by his “friend”.

In the case of Singer and Antonapoulos, the relationship seems to fit Bibler’s latter definition, if not even mix the two definitions together. Each side of the Singer-Antonapoulos relationship seems like a one-way street, with the two never really intersecting. Singer’s love for Antonapoulos is “equitable and loving”, while Antonapoulos’ is “exploitative or even coerced.” Bibler cites what Leo Bersani calls “homo-ness.” Bersani suggests that heterosexual desire is rooted in “the desire for an other who is different from the self.” On the other hand, homosexual desire is rooted in a desire “to repeat, to expand, to intensify the same.” Bibler argues that “because this desire privileges sameness above all else,” that sameness “works to equalize any other social differences” (7). Singer and Antonapoulos’ relationship works even though they are so different because of this “homo-ness” as it pertains to “the effect produced when sexual sameness supersedes all other factors of identity” (Bibler 7). The issue I take with Bibler’s contention is that it doesn’t hold true for McCullers’ characters. While according to Bibler, the concept may apply to Faulkner’s or Williams’ characters, it doesn’t apply to Singer and Antonapoulos. I simply do not believe that Singer sees himself in Antonapoulos – the characters are simply too different.

However, while I disagree with Bibler’s assessment of Bersani’s “homo-ness”, I agree with Bibler’s notion that “homosexuality is a powerful site for rethinking the hierarchical networks of relationality that dominate culture” (Bibler 8). The relationship between Singer and Antonapoulos is far from socially

acceptable, even if it had been a gay relationship more like the socially accepted ones in mainstream culture today. (I'm personally reminded of the loving and familial relationship between the fictional Cameron and Mitch on the current ABC sitcom "Modern Family" or the character of Will Truman on the now-cancelled sitcom "Will & Grace." These examples are, of course, comical, but the point remains: homosexuality has become mainstream and socially acceptable; abusive homosexuality has not.) The fact that the relationship between Singer and Antonapoulos is abusive removes it even further from the realm of social normalcy, a position that McCullers was very familiar with herself; a young woman writing in the 1940s and '50s, who dressed like a man and did as she wished was not socially appropriate. To be gay is to be in the social minority in the 1950s; to be in a non-functioning and abusive gay relationship is even "worse." And yet, it is this type of relationship that Singer and Antonapoulos share.

To emphasize just how odd this type of relationship would have been for American literature, much less traditional European Gothic literature, it is helpful to consider what Eric Savoy writes in his essay, "The Rise of American Gothic", which is included in the Jerrold E. Hogel edition of *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. Savoy writes that while European gothic writing was often explicit, it was nothing compared to the American Gothic: "European modernists had not yet reached the pitch of extreme consciousness that animated the American nineteenth century; whereas modernists were 'trying to be extreme,' many nineteenth-century Americans 'just were it'" (Hogel 170). Savoy attributes this split between European and American gothic styles to the continuous drive of

Americans to be unique and separate from all things British – especially in the 1800s. Though McCullers’ writing doesn’t come until the mid-1900s, it is possible that she was attempting to achieve the same type of uniqueness – a shift from traditional American writing that was so unlike anything else that it would help to form a new sub-genre of literature: the Southern Gothic.

However, it is not only *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* which firmly places Carson McCullers as a staple in the Southern Gothic genre. Her 1946 novel, *The Member of the Wedding* also includes a number of non-traditional gender and relational roles, specifically as they relate to her protagonist, Frankie. Like Mick Kelly, Frankie is also an adolescent girl, twelve at the opening of the novel, and is given a boy’s name. Her very first words in the novel are, “It is so very queer” (McCullers 461), and from this – the very first page – the similarities between Frankie and Mick begin to appear. McCullers says that, like Mick, Frankie feels out of place and like she has no specific place to call her own. She is often said to be “afraid” and McCullers writes that she “was a member of nothing in the world” (461). In addition to her lack of a sense of belonging, Frankie is rough and mean. She is tall – “so tall that she was almost a big freak” (462) – yet, like Mick again, she has a sibling who is socially traditional. Mick’s sisters are the epitome of Southern Belles; Frankie’s brother Jarvis is an attractive man serving in the Army who is about to wed a pretty girl from a small town. Furthermore, Frankie’s father works in a jewelry store, a mirrored profession of Mick’s father in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and both the Kellys and the Addamses rent space in their homes to tenants. These connections between the two novels are only the beginning of two

McCullers tales that are very tightly woven. It should be noted that there are a few key differences between the pieces, but certainly the commonalities between the characters in each novel outnumber the variations in plot sequence. For example, while Mick wants her name to reflect anonymity, Frankie wants a feminine name. She asks if it is legal to add to her name, and if it is, she wants to be known as F. Jasmine Addams.

In discussing the upcoming wedding, Frankie mentions on numerous occasions her desire to never return after it is over: “I’ve been ready to leave this town so long. I wish I didn’t have to come back here after the wedding. I wish I was going somewhere for good. I wish I had a hundred dollars and could just light out and never see this town again... I wish I was somebody else except me” (465). Frankie’s words ring in an almost eerie echo to Mick Kelly. Like Mick’s desire to fit in and squelch her loneliness by hosting a party, Frankie tries to find comfort in the secretive company of others. The only friend she really has is John Henry, a six-year-old boy who lives down the street and frequently comes over to play cards with Frankie and her family’s housekeeper, Berenice. After she invites John Henry to stay the night with her, the readers can first assume that he is just a lonely kid like Frankie. Presumably, the two will go through the stereotypical motions of a typical sleepover: the staying up late, talking about other kids, falling asleep on the floor. But as is the case in many of McCullers’ pieces, there is an ulterior motive for the protagonist. The night is hot and humid – a common summer night in McCullers’ Deep South settings – and once John Henry takes his shirt and glasses off, he falls asleep in Frankie’s bed. She hears him breathing and sees John Henry

as a solution to her loneliness. McCullers writes: “and now she had what she had wanted so many nights that summer; there was somebody sleeping in the bed with her ... Carefully she put her hand on his stomach and moved closer; it felt as though a little clock was ticking inside him and he smelled of sweat and Sweet Serenade” (472). She leans down, licks him behind the ear and falls asleep, settled and comfortable with her chin on his shoulder. The scene ends with McCullers’ explanation that “for now, with somebody sleeping in the dark with her, she was not so much afraid” (472). For so many of McCullers’ characters, loneliness and isolation are so engrained into their hearts that it seems nearly impossible to not expect each of them, especially characters such as Frankie Addams or Mick Kelly, to find a solution – even if it seems odd and a bit uncomfortable for the reader. Though the scene is bizarre, especially for readers with active imaginations who picture the children curled up together while Frankie licks John Henry, it sets the scene for a much larger plot point: Frankie feels so alone that she desires to become a literal member of her brother’s wedding. She wants to leave her hometown and travel to Winter Hill with her brother and his new wife to become a member of their marriage – what McCullers will later call “the we of me.”

Furthermore, the connection between social awkwardness and the idea of being a Freak surfaces repeatedly in *The Member of the Wedding*. Frankie thinks about the Chattahoochee Exposition, a fair that visits her town in October. At the fair is an exhibit known as the “House of the Freaks.” Frankie is most drawn to The Half-Man Half-Woman, “a morphidite and a miracle of science” who was “divided completely in half – the left side was a man and the right side a woman”

(McCullers 477). Perhaps it is this particular Freak that McCullers chose to best represent Mick or Frankie – or even herself.

Michelle Ann Abate dedicates an entire chapter to Frankie Addams and *The Member of the Wedding* in her book. Titled “The Tomboy Turns Freakishly Queer and Queerishly Freakish,” the chapter explores Frankie’s sexuality and gender complexities and frequently compares them to McCullers herself. Abate writes: “Always longing to stand out from the crowd, [McCullers] refused to conform to feminine conventions of dress. As biographer Virginia Spencer Carr noted, she cut her hair short and ‘wore dirty tennis shoes or brown Girl Scout Oxfords when the other girls were wearing hose and dainty heels’” (Abate 152). It is Abate’s contention that Frankie Addams “becomes a symbol of the gendered, raced and sexualized anxieties that have emerged from the flux and instability of the war years” (155). She later adds that because the tomboy had long existed as the outward manifestation of a woman’s inner struggle between masculinity and femininity as well as homosexuality and heterosexuality, characters such as Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams become the perfect protagonists to represent the “crumbling wartime distinctions between normality and abnormality” (Abate 159).

McCullers shows Frankie to be a girl always afraid of falling through the cracks – of getting left behind. In thinking about the war going on overseas, Frankie daydreams of fighting the enemy herself. Because she knows that as a young girl, she cannot actually fight, she dreams of giving her blood to soldiers via the Red Cross donation program. This, she thinks, will allow her to partake in the war effort – a job reserved for men – in a different and unique way. She daydreams

that the army doctors will find her blood to be the “reddest and strongest blood that they had ever known” and later, when she meets the soldiers who received her blood, “they would say that they owed their life to her and they would not call her Frankie – they would call her Addams.” Her tomboyish nature wishes to be a part of a male-dominated war and as she later says, she “was not afraid of Germans or bombs or Japanese. She was afraid because in the war they would not include her, and because the world seemed somehow separate from herself” (McCullers 480). In a similar fantasy a little later in the novel, Frankie says that she can feel Jarvis and Janice leaving as a part of her accompanies them.

What happens for Frankie in many cases is that if she can’t do something or be a part of something, her fantasy allows a *part* of her to be there or to go. The fantasy is not about splitting herself into two distinct people, but rather feeling that some part of herself has been accepted into either a man’s or an adult’s world in which she is unable to participate. It is not just the reader who notices this fantasy either. Berenice also calls Frankie out on what she calls “a serious fault”:

Somebody just makes a loose remark and then you cozen it in your mind until nobody would recognize it. Your Aunt Pet happened to mention to Clorina that you had sweet manners and Clorina passed it on to you. For what it was worth. Then next thing I know you are going all around and bragging how Mrs. West thought you had the finest manners in town and ought to go to Hollywood, and I don’t know what all you didn’t say. You keep building on to any little compliment you hear about yourself. Or, if it is a bad thing, you do the same. You cozen and change things too much in your own mind. And that is a serious fault. (489)

Frankie’s doesn’t see her fantasy world as a fault, however, and in fact, she takes her daydreaming to a new level when she begins to imagine herself, as the title

suggests, as an *actual* member of her brother's wedding. She claims to love both her brother and Janice in such a strong way that she fantasizes about traveling with them after the wedding and spending virtually every waking moment with them.

Abate points out this desire to become a part of the wedding – which would be considered ridiculous by most of the standards of social normalcy – as something that is fairly indefinable: “As neither a homosexual nor entirely heterosexual desire but something that exists on the interstice between the two, Frankie's wish can best be characterized as queer” (Abate 161). While I agree that the arrangement is odd, perhaps Abate is overlooking a critical fact: Frankie sees the wedding as simply a place that will be the catalyst for her escape from a life that frequently leaves her lonely and isolated. In speaking with Berenice, Frankie says, “I'm going to Winter Hill. I'm going to the wedding. And I swear to Jesus by my two eyes I'm never coming back here any more” (McCullers 492). Furthermore, McCullers notes Frankie's inner monologue – words which were never spoken, but which were shared with the readers via the omniscient narrator. She writes, “... [Frankie] had not known she would say these words until already they were spoken” (492). Frankie is clearly looking for something more than what her current life offers to her. She sees the world as fast, furious and much more overwhelming than she feels she can handle; however, what Frankie doesn't know is how a life after Jarvis' wedding will be any different. She seems trapped in a constant battle of “the grass is greener” with little to no indication – real or imagined – of *what* about the other side will actually *be* any better. As she thinks

about the places she might end up, she becomes so agitated and nervous that she begins to shake and her palms begin to sweat. The anxiety Frankie feels is due to her lack of belonging, both in the place she currently resides and in the unknown future of where she will ultimately reside.

However, Frankie's real epiphany happens in a conversation with John Henry – about halfway through the novel – in which she realizes that Jarvis and Janice are now more than one hundred miles away in Winter Hill. It is then that McCullers introduces the readers to a powerful concept: “the we of me” (497). Frankie believes that Jarvis and Janice, as a pair, complete her. McCullers writes, “Yesterday, and all the twelve years of her life, she had only been Frankie. She was an *I* person who had to walk around and do things by herself. All other people had a *we* to claim, all others except her” (497). Frankie thinks to herself that people who are married are part of a *we* with their spouses; members of the armed forces are a *we* with their fellow soldiers; even criminals on chain-gangs have a concept of *we*. But Frankie doesn't feel that she has a *we* until she comes to the realization that the wedding will give her an opportunity to join up with a couple and become a part of their “we.” She ends her daydream sequence with the phrase, “They are the we of me” (497) and it is then that the readers can clearly see her intentions.

Frankie's desire to be part of a collective whole is the turning point in the novel. She announces to John Henry that she had made up her mind – she will go to Winter Hill, where she will join Jarvis and Janice in whatever they do after the wedding. Her decision causes “her heart [to divide] like two wings” and she says

she's "never seen a night so beautiful" (McCullers 501). The first part of *The Member of the Wedding* ends with Frankie's awareness of who she is and where she is going: "She loved her brother and the bride and she was a member of the wedding. The three of them would go into the world and they would always be together. And finally, after the scared spring and the crazy summer, she was no more afraid" (McCullers 501). From this point on, the thought of the wedding consumes Frankie so much that she seldom focuses on other responsibilities. She borrows tools from her father and forgets them at John Henry's house, which gets her into trouble, and, when her father tells her that John Henry's uncle Charles has died, Frankie can only reply, "Poor Uncle Charles. That certainly is a pity" (McCullers 516). McCullers prefaces this comment with the explanation that "[Charles] had been sick for a long time; it was said he had one foot in the grave ... Now he was dead. But that had nothing to do with the wedding ..." (516).

By the time the day of the wedding arrives, Frankie has changed her name to F. Jasmine – and it remains her name throughout the duration of the novel. The name is not the only change, however. F. Jasmine Addams is drastically different in personality now that she feels she will be a part of the wedding. McCullers writes, "the old Frankie of yesterday had been puzzled, but F. Jasmine did not wonder any more" (503). In fact, as she gets ready in the morning at the hotel in which she and her father are staying for the wedding, she dresses in pink, puts on lipstick and even sprays herself with perfume (ironically, the same perfume she sprays all over John Henry in the first part of the novel). Her announcement to her father that she will not be returning home after the wedding doesn't seem to shock

her father, who sloughs it off as a childish comment that holds no real weight; and it seems her father is correct. F. Jasmine thinks she has become something entirely different than she was in the beginning of the novel, but in reality, she is simply masking the scared little girl she has always been. Gleeson-White writes, “Berenice observes that Frankie looks incongruous in the gaudy orange satin dress she has chosen for the wedding” (89). Berenice says to Frankie, it is as if “you had all your hair shaved off like a convict, and now you tie a silver ribbon around his head without any hair. It just looks peculiar... and look at them elbows ... Here you got on this grown woman’s evening dress ... and that brown crust on your elbows. The two things just don’t mix” (McCullers 540). Reading this section, I came to the same conclusion as Gleeson-White: “Through such absurd mimicry of femininity, overlaid with her tomboyishness, Frankie fails to rehearse a properly feminine gender role...” (89).

The connections between Mick Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding* are not only in their personalities, ages or family lives. Both protagonists are also classic Southern Gothic characters. As previously mentioned in the introduction, the characteristics of Southern Gothic novels are very often the same characteristics found in classic European Gothic tales; however, there is a slight twist. If these tales were classically “gothic,” Mick and Frankie would be physically isolated characters, trapped in the darkness and pining for the physical presence of another person; but in the cases of Mick and Frankie, both are never *actually* alone. They routinely *feel* isolated or lonely, but spend virtually the entire duration of their

time in the pages of their respective novels surrounded by other people. They are emotionally isolated; they fear the world around them, and use much of the classically gothic vocabulary to describe the way they feel. Recall that in European Gothic pieces, characters often refer to themselves as “afraid” or “frightened” – these types of words carry through to the Southern Gothic pieces as well.

The rules initially laid out by Horace Walpole in the writing of *The Castle of Otranto* are, not surprisingly, frequently regarded by Mick and Frankie. In fact, *The Castle of Otranto* opens with a wedding scene, though it is overshadowed by a frightening ancient prophecy. In McCullers’ wedding story, it is not a fear of the past that overshadows the characters, but rather a fear of the unknown future. Frankie’s anxiety does not stem from what has happened in years past, but rather what she fears will happen in the future if she doesn’t escape to something bigger and better. Furthermore, the settings of the traditional Gothic fiction – usually castles, abandoned mansions or cathedrals – are abandoned by Southern Gothic writers for the plantation house or Southern farm. The European Gothic tales take place in the dark; the Southern Gothic tales take place in the light. This clearly rings true for *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*. The homes in McCullers’ works are rural homes in small Southern towns, but there are certainly neighbors, and in many cases, the main characters even share their living space with tenants who rent rooms. In addition, in many of the stories, the family on which McCullers focuses (i.e. the Kelly Family or the Addams family) has hired help living with them or in quarters which are on the family property. In

both *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding*, McCullers includes a number of scenes in which family and friends gather for large meals in a communal dining room. These details paint a vivid picture for the reader: the characters' lives revolve around a very-often brightly-lit Southern home that is full of warmth, conversation and social gathering. They are places that to characters *other* than Mick, Singer, Antonapoulos and Frankie are cozy and inviting.

E.J. Clery, in his essay "The Genesis of Gothic Fiction" also points out that the classic European Gothic story often focuses on a type of romance. Clery writes of a piece written by Horace Walpole prior to *The Castle of Otronto*. The piece was titled "The Mysterious Mother: A Tragedy" and was initially published in 1768. In it, as Clery explains

The Countess of Narbonne, maddened by learning of the death of her husband, secretly and in disguise committed premeditated incest with her son, bore a child from that union, and in spite of attempts to expiate the sin through good works, has suffered years of inner torment before killing herself when father/son and daughter/sister unwittingly fall in love and the truth is exposed. With this story, Walpole aimed to create a character "quite new on the stage." (Hogel 31)

The connection here between Walpole and McCullers proves an important point: McCullers is certainly not the first of the gothic writers (nor the last) to focus on strange occurrences of a sexual nature. Though many readers assume that the awkward and socially abnormal relationships of McCullers' writing are original or new to the Southern Gothic genre (or even to the early American gothic writing of Poe, Faulkner, etc...), her inclusion of relationships such as the one between

Singer and Antonapoulos are not new to the more general Gothic genre. Frankie's desire to become a literal member of her brother's wedding is odd, yes, but is it really that much different in social awkwardness from the storylines found in Walpole's work? The answer is an unequivocal and resounding "no."

While McCullers may not be the most prominent or most studied writer of the twentieth century, her contributions to American fiction can scarcely be overlooked as insignificant. Drawing on the traditions of the past Gothic culture and altering them to include a modern spin allowed McCullers to do something few other authors had accomplished – successfully mix the past with the present, while still holding true to the characteristics of a genre that had already been popular among Gothic fans for centuries.

## Chapter 2

## Violent Relationships and Sexual Isolation in Tennessee Williams'

*A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*

Just as the characters in Carson McCullers' novels are seemingly drawn to freakish relationships which result in isolation and loneliness, the characters in the plays of Tennessee Williams are often people who struggle with identity, sexuality and romantic relationships. Though Williams wrote a number of pieces which became part of the canon of popular American fiction, including *The Glass Menagerie* and a number of poems and short stories, his two plays, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, are perhaps the pieces that most strongly depict characters who are caught in abusive and sexually confusing relationships. The grotesque characteristics of the American Gothic genre – including fear, violence, isolation and regret – rear their ugly faces again in the work of Tennessee Williams, who, like McCullers, helped to shape the sub-category of the genre known as the Southern Gothic.

Williams wrote the majority of his work in the wake of World War II, a time in which people, especially in the southern states, were trying to rebuild their lives and rebound from a time that had left many of them penniless, sickly and emotionally drained. The irony of this timing is that many of Williams' characters still choose to live in the past, focused on what had been, rather than the present or what is to come. This dichotomy of time is odd – why would characters want to dwell on a past that is poor, unhappy and full of turmoil instead of looking forward to a future that could offer the possibility of happier times and

a more positive lifestyle? However, as much as it may not make sense at first, closer examination of Williams' work shows that he was able to create characters who drew audiences in *because* of their inability to move forward and face reality.

In fact, the American public was so entranced by Williams' stories that the most popular of his plays were made into feature films. Few literature and film aficionados can say they have never seen clips of Marlon Brando's famous "Stellllllaaa!" speech which was featured in the 1951 film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Brando and co-star Vivien Leigh, who won an Oscar for her role as Blanche DuBois. (Brando had also played Stanley in the original New York production of the play across from Jessica Tandy as Blanche.) The film was nominated for eleven Academy Awards (including one for Marlon Brando for Best Male Actor in a Leading Role) and, like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, has become a staple of American film classics. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* premiered in 1958 and starred Elizabeth Taylor and Paul Newman – two classic American film stars who helped raise Williams' work to a new level of prestige and recognition – as Maggie and Brick Pollitt. The film was nominated for six Oscars in 1959, including Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Director and Best Picture.

Clearly, the public's fascination with Tennessee Williams spans the generations, but the question is why? Why are so many American readers drawn to the often dark and depressing storylines of this particular writer? What is it about Williams that draws viewers and readers into the lives of characters who struggle with their relationships and themselves, at times to the point of madness? One review of a stage production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, written by John

McClain and published in the *New York Journal-American*, says, “It is a powerful and provocative evening; you are torn between fascination and revulsion, but you are held” (47). Perhaps, like McCullers and the Gothic writers who came long before Southern Gothic was ever established, the audience is drawn to the darkness and isolation which is so often an exaggeration of the very feelings they experience themselves. Surely, stories about unhappy marriages, familial turmoil and loneliness are not farfetched for many readers, and escaping to the pages of McCullers, Williams and O’Connor gives these readers a chance to realize they are not actually alone. In her essay, “Tennessee Williams and the Predicament of Women,” author Louise Blackwell writes, “While it is true that many of Williams’ characters speak with Southern accents, close scrutiny reveals that their problems are the old, universal ones of the human heart in its search for reality and meaning in life” (Martin ed. 243). It is important to note, however, that although sex was important to Williams, he never included direct sexual acts in his plays or had actors and actresses play them out on stage. Instead, Williams shows how sex acts affected his characters *after the fact*.

It is a well-known fact that Williams moved around frequently and led what most people would consider to be a very irregular life. His own family life was plagued by unrest and fear, especially of his father (who many say is characterized by Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*) and he rarely found happiness with his romantic relationships. As Robert Martin writes in the introduction to his collection of essays about Tennessee Williams, “his plays [are] written about the loners, the outcasts, and the fragile people whose dramatic

situations involve lost dreams and last chances” (*Critical Essays* 2) and in many cases, this apt description of Williams’ fictional characters could also be applied to Williams himself, thus placing him even more firmly into the Gothic genre. Like McCullers, Williams helped to take the American Gothic genre even further, pushing it to something that would later be considered its own sub-genre of Southern Gothic. It should come as no surprise then that the two plays on which I’ve chosen to focus, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, do exactly that – push the limits of morality and propriety to whole new levels for literature of the mid 1900s.

When *A Streetcar Named Desire* was first published in 1947, it was called one of the most remarkable plays of the century by critics and reviewers. It followed Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie*, which had, as Williams wrote, “terminated one part of my life and began another about as different in all external circumstances as could be well imagined” (Introduction 1). *The Glass Menagerie* had thrust Williams into American prominence as a writer and playwright, but as Williams himself admitted just prior to opening night of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in New York on November 30, 1947, his life before fame and prestige was one filled with struggle and “required endurance, a life of clawing and scratching along a sheer surface and holding on tight with raw fingers to every inch of rock higher than the one caught hold of before...” (Introduction 1). It is then not surprising that Williams’ characters seem to experience much of the same struggle and “required endurance” that he tolerated himself.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* tells the story of Blanche DuBois, a fragile and, in many ways, broken woman of the American South, who loses her last chance at happiness when it is cruelly destroyed by her brother-in-law, the barbaric Stanley Kowalski. The play, told in one act split into eleven scenes, opens in New Orleans in May; Stanley and his wife Stella welcome Stella's sister, Blanche to their home. From the very beginning, Blanche is clearly unhappy. She is critical of the Kowalski's home, whines and complains about virtually every aspect of her visit and practically calls Stella "fat" (21). She is ill-mannered and impolite toward Stanley's "Polack" friends (23) and puts a guilt trip on Stella for leaving their family home in Mississippi in order to marry Stanley (25). At the end of Scene I, Blanche meets Stanley for the first time and the audience learns, after a question from Stanley, that her husband died at a young age. The scene ends with a dramatic flair as Blanche says, "The boy – the boy died" and "I'm afraid I'm – I'm going to be sick!" (31). As the lights go down, the audience sees Williams' stage directions played out: "Her head falls on her arms" (31).

As *A Streetcar Named Desire* progresses, the audience sees more and more examples of dysfunction, madness and depression. Blanche simply cannot face the harsh reality that is her life, and Stella and Stanley's abusive marriage almost becomes tolerable because it is better than the turbulent loneliness which Blanche routinely feels. When I first read *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 2009, I struggled with it and its characters, mainly because the play is so emotionally and psychologically disturbing. Not much has changed in subsequent readings. Stanley's alcoholism is evident and its affects on Stella are frightening. Blanche's

actions are, at times, infuriating, but can also seem justified. She is, at one point, raped by her sister's abusive husband (while Stella is pregnant, nonetheless) and admits to having lost her home in Mississippi and being fired from her teaching position for having an inappropriate sexual relationship with a student.

Furthermore, the audience learns in Scene VI that Blanche's husband, Allan, shattered her adolescent dreams about love and relationships. She tells Mitch:

He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery – love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow ... but I was unlucky ... I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself. Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty – which wasn't empty, but had two people in it ... the boy I had married and an older man who had been his friend for years. (*Streetcar* 95)

At first, they pretended that nothing had happened, but while dancing together one night, Blanche finally breaks: "I saw! I know! You disgust me" (*Streetcar* 96).

Allan runs out of the casino/club, puts a revolver in his mouth and pulls the trigger. It is Blanche who sees the back of his head, "blown away" (96) and it is at this point in the story that she allows Mitch to take her to bed, a lonely and vulnerable woman who has lost the only man she ever loved to shame and guilt about his sexual preferences. As Senata Bauer-Briski, author of, *The Role of Sexuality in the Major Plays of Tennessee Williams*, states, "Had Allan been heterosexual, things would have turned out differently and Blanche might have been able to lead a perfectly normal and happy life. However, the discovery of her

husband's homosexuality and her culpability in his suicide left deep marks on her psyche, which was already so delicate that even a minor incident would have shattered her" (47).

References to homosexual relationships also surface in *Cat on a Tin Roof* when questions are raised about Brick's friendship (or perhaps romance) with Skipper. With plot points such as these, how could this storyline not offend or anger the audience – especially in the 1940s and '50s when the plays premiered to audiences who were still wary of "nontraditional" lifestyles? Readers and viewers alike seem to be immediately drawn to *Streetcar* and *Cat* because of their shock value. Recalling my first reading of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it was done in one sitting so that I could learn the fate of each character. In finishing the piece, I felt a range of emotions: anger toward Stanley, sympathy and sorrow for Mitch, empathy for Stella and a general sense of confusion toward Blanche, whose slide into madness really begins within the first scene, but is not fully realized until the closing pages when she is escorted away to the mental institution. Stella is left in tears as Stanley tries to comfort her and the poker game resumes in the apartment.

As Blanche leaves the house with the doctor, she says, "Whoever you are – I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (*Streetcar* 142), showing that she has never really been independent. She has depended more on the kindness of her imagination than the harshness of her reality. In order to feel anything *real* or *legitimate*, she needs to rely on other people. In addition, Blanche is not the only one who needs an imaginary life to usurp the one she's actually living. Stella appears to be more stable than Blanche in many ways, but she, too,

creates illusions to protect herself from reality: Stanley is forceful and abusive while she is pregnant and trapped in a bad marriage.

In fact, the leading women of these two particular Williams' plays are often compared and some critics contend that what makes them so similar is their shared experience as women who refuse to accept reality and instead live a life of delusion. It is this life of delusion that does exactly what the Gothic requires: turn the stereotypical idea of American normalcy upside down. Both Maggie and Stella are women who at one point announce pregnancies, though Stella's is real and Maggie's isn't. However, both women desire to have children, a decision that in their imaginations, a delusional world, is a good idea. For each of them, the idea of a child is something which they feel will complete their families; in reality, a child will simply be another burden on an already dysfunctional marriage.

In her essay "Blanche DuBois and Maggie the Cat: Illusion and Reality in Tennessee Williams," author Dianne Cafagna writes that because Williams was himself torn between reality and illusion, it is logical that his characters would feel this dichotomy as well. She writes, "Williams was deeply troubled on one hand by an urge to become part of his society, and on the other by a fear of conforming to the meaningless drudgery of familial obligation. Such a paradox led Williams to dramatize his southern characters' necessary illusions in facing the grim realities of twentieth-century life" (Cafagna 119). In addition, she explains that both Blanche DuBois and Maggie the Cat are women who "are

fortified by illusion and ... risk all stability to face the crisis and choose to live in the real world” (Cafagna 119).

*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was first published in 1954 and set in Mississippi. The play centers around two brothers vying for their dying father’s inheritance. The focus shifts between the two men, Brick Pollitt and his brother Gooper, and Brick’s wife, Maggie, the title “cat” of the play. Amidst the whirlwind of sexual confusion and repressed emotions, the audience watches as the Pollitt family essentially falls apart. Just like the marriage between Stella and Stanley in *Streetcar*, Brick and Maggie’s marriage in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is turbulent and abusive at times, and the sibling (Gooper in *Cat*, Blanche in *Streetcar*) frequently causes trouble for the protagonists. Furthermore, just as Blanche’s husband struggled with sexuality and committed suicide, Brick’s latent homosexuality threatens to tear apart the Pollitt family as well.

Michael P. Bibler, who wrote about Carson McCullers’ work as well as the work of Tennessee Williams, discusses this sexual tension in a chapter of his book, *Cotton’s Queer Relations: Same-Sex Intimacy and the Literature of the Southern Plantation, 1936-1968*. In a chapter on “Homo-ness and Fluidity” in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Bibler surmises that the play is eerily similar to William Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936). This connection is certainly not questionable. Surely, Faulkner’s earlier writings paved the way for the Southern Gothic writers who followed – including McCullers, Williams and O’Connor. Allan Lloyd-Smith also cites Faulkner as a predominant author who helped move the American gothic genre of Poe and Hawthorne into a more modern Southern

setting. He notes that the ending of *Absalom! Absalom!* “echoes the destruction of Poe’s *House of Usher*” and that the story attempts to get readers to “imagine the past” (Lloyd-Smith 118). Lloyd-Smith continues: “In such iconic moments Faulkner reinvents the Gothic, focusing on its stylized intensity of violence and relation to the official past of memorial and statuary, within which the present becomes just another instance of the past, a repeated motif of condensed cruelty and inevitability...” (118). These repeated motifs of cruelty and focusing on the past are certainly not reserved for Faulkner’s works alone. The trend continued into the mid-twentieth century as writers like Williams, McCullers and O’Connor became more prolific.

Bibler points out that in the case of Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, “the homoerotic bond between the men is clearly a very strong force” and that it is this homoeroticism that “produces the notorious resistance to narrative closure for which these texts are renowned” (96). Undertones of homosexuality are frequent in *Cat*, as the audience learns that Big Daddy inherited his estate from a deceased gay couple, Jack Straw and Peter Ochello. But even with this history, Big Daddy still struggles with his son’s sexuality and the audience is left to wonder whether or not he will leave his estate to Brick. Bibler writes, “Where the notion of sameness implicit in their queer relation allows elite white men to share power horizontally, Williams shows how the plantation’s insistence on a heterosexual, patrilineal inheritance from father to son invokes an ideological notion of sameness, only in a vertical arrangement across time” (97). In other words, it is Bibler’s contention that even though the

estate – “twenty-eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile” (*Cat* 88) – was established and maintained initially by a gay couple, it is Big Daddy’s concern that Brick’s homosexuality will ultimately destroy it – in essence, the future is more dangerous than the past, even though they are in many ways, one in the same. I should note, however, that this is a much argued point about *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; while authors like Bibler say it is Brick’s homosexuality that discourages Big Daddy from leaving him the estate, other authors say it has nothing to do with sexuality and everything to do with Brick’s alcoholism that raises questions about Brick’s ability to responsibly accept the estate from his father.

It is not just the homosexual tendencies and questions that are raised about sexuality which are common between *Streetcar* and *Cat*. Both plays also feature characters – both male and female – who are caught in turbulent marriages. Though pregnancy in a marriage is traditionally seen as a positive scenario, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stella’s pregnancy leaves the audience feeling uncomfortable and even frightened. Stella’s marriage to Stanley is turbulent to say the least – he is an abusive alcoholic who becomes violent with Blanche. He frequently yells at both Stella and Blanche and makes it clear that he is the man of the house, his rules are to be followed, and his way is the only one acceptable in the home. For example, Blanche has told Stanley and Stella that her Mississippi home, Belle Reve, has been lost. Immediately, Blanche assumes that Stella blames her for it, yelling, “You’re a fine one to ask me how it went!” (*Streetcar* 26). Though Stella initially reassures Blanche that she doesn’t find fault with her,

Stanley is not as quick to accept Blanche's excuses. After Blanche sends Stella to the store to "get me a lemon-coke with plenty of chipped ice in it" (40), she tells Stanley, "All right. Cards on the table. That suits me... I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion, but when a thing is important I tell the truth, and this is the truth: I haven't cheated my sister or you or anyone else as long as I have lived" (41). But Stanley pushes her further as to the whereabouts of the legal papers associated with Belle Reve: "Where's the papers? In the trunk?" (41). Blanche doesn't back down: "What in the name of heaven are you thinking of! What's in the back of that little boy's mind of yours? That I am absconding with something, attempting some kind of treachery on my sister? – Let me do that! It will be faster and simpler... I keep my papers mostly in this tin box" (41). While the rest of the box contains love letters from Blanche's dead husband, Stanley again pushes further, until he finds papers from Ambler & Ambler, the firm that, according to Blanche, made loans on the place.

It is then through their conversation that the audience learns that the home was lost on a mortgage which was never paid. Stanley's interest in Belle Reve is clearly not about his wife's well-being, or Blanche's for that matter, either. He is clearly most concerned with what he can procure from the loss of the house: "You see, under the Napoleonic code – a man has to take an interest in his wife's affairs – especially now that she is going to have a baby" (43). Stella's wishes to not tell Blanche about her pregnancy have also now been ignored by Stanley, who has clearly disregarded both his wife and his sister-in-law's feelings and desires. But perhaps the worst part of the entire scenario is that Stella often justifies her

husband's obnoxious behavior, essentially saying "boys will be boys." Blanche is upset that her sister would continue to be with Stanley, much less have a child with him, but Stella shrugs it off, saying, "You're making too much fuss about this... In the first place, when men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen. It's always a powder-keg. He didn't know what he was doing ... He was as good as a lamb when I came back and he's really very, very ashamed of himself" (63). Blanche asks, "And that – that makes it all right?" Stella replies: "No, it isn't all right for anybody to make such a terrible row, but – people do sometimes. Stanley's always smashed things. Why, on our wedding night – soon as we came in here – he snatched off one of my slippers and rushed about the place smashing the light bulbs with it" (63-64). With this, Williams establishes Stanley's history of violence, angry outbursts, and disregard for his wife's feelings, but he also makes it clear that Stella enabled the behavior by choosing to stay with him. In fact, she admits that at times, she was "thrilled by it" (64). The marriage has been turbulent since the beginning, but Williams shows that Stella has allowed it, and for that, the audience is supposed to accept it. Since Stella has done nothing to rectify the situation, and because she comments on it using a positive word like "thrilled," the audience is left to simply shrug their shoulders and say that Stella's lot in life is now unavoidable. It may not be socially acceptable in the minds of the audience, and perhaps it wasn't acceptable for Williams either, but for Stella, her tolerance of Stanley and her unwillingness to leave him (or even *threaten* to leave him) tells the audience to essentially "stay

out of it;” if Stella herself isn’t worried about what will become of her, then we as readers shouldn’t be concerned either.

Furthermore, Williams establishes a relationship between Stella and Stanley that, though violent and dysfunctional, is actually desired by both people and recognized by other characters as dramatic but not worth leaving. Both Stanley and Stella actually seem content with their troubled marriage. When Stanley is away, Stella vocalizes how much she misses him, and following their fight on poker night, Stanley cries for Stella in one of the most famous scenes in American literary drama history: “Stella! My baby doll’s left me!” (*Streetcar* 60). Williams includes poignant stage directions: “He breaks into sobs. Then he goes to the phone and dials, still shuddering with sobs.” He speaks into the receiver: “Eunice? I want my baby ... Eunice! I’ll keep on ringin’ until I talk with my baby!” He proceeds to the porch, calling his wife’s name in what Williams says is “like a baying hound” until Eunice emerges and tells him to “Quit that howling out there an’ go back to bed.” Finally, Mitch tells Blanche, who is visibly shaken by the scene, “There’s nothing to be scared of. They’re crazy about each other” (*Streetcar* 61).

The same disrespect and violence that is prominent in the Kowalski house can be seen in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, as the story mirrors many scenarios – including unwanted pregnancy, violence, sexual tension and alcoholism – which are almost identically played out in the Pollitt house. What’s interesting about this particular story, however, is that it initially began as a story of violence and turbulence focused on Brick rather than Maggie. Williams wrote the story first

under the title, “Three Players of a Summer Game” in 1951-1952. According to Michael Paller, author of *Gentleman Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Drama*, the story of Brick and Maggie Pollitt began as a tale in which Brick was driven to alcoholism and collapse; the story originally ended with his being taken away by police officers after he collapsed in his front lawn wearing nothing but a pair of underwear. In response to his downfall, Maggie is transformed into the “masculine” character, cutting her hair short, driving Brick’s car, taking ownership of his plantation, seizing Brick’s power of attorney and his business affairs, and maintaining the household after Brick is gone. The readers of “Three Players of a Summer Game” are left wondering what happens to their marriage and very few questions are answered. The focus of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is essentially the same – a turbulent marriage ending with the downfall of a spouse – but in *Cat*, it is Maggie who falls apart and Brick who is left to pick up the pieces. Why Williams chose to reverse the roles of the troubled couple may not be crystal clear, but the overarching theme of the turbulent marriage was, for Williams, unavoidable. At one point, Williams wrote of his own work, “I think that deliberate, conscienceless mendacity, the acceptance of falsehood and hypocrisy, is the most dangerous of sins ... I meant for the audience to discover how people erect false values by not facing what is true in their natures, by having to live a lie” (Paller 121). Whether it was Brick or Maggie who failed didn’t matter – what did matter was that one of the two had to break.

Like Stella and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the marriage of Brick and Maggie Pollitt is often interrupted by an outside force, in both cases, a family member. As Blanche descends upon the Kowalski home and causes trouble, it is Gooper and his wife Mae (as well as Big Daddy) who tend to cause tension in the Pollitt home. Maggie says that she thinks Gooper believes he's stepped up the social ladder through his marriage to Mae, but according to Maggie, Mae's family never had anything but money – and always lacked class – and what they did have was lost. But the reader cannot help but notice that Gooper and Mae at least seem happier than Brick and Maggie, who are, as Maggie says, “trapped in the same cage” (Cat 35). At times, Maggie admits that she doesn't think Brick even loves her and that she feels “like a cat on a hot tin roof,” to which Brick replies, “jump off – cats do it all the time” (40).

The tension between Brick and Maggie stems from their position in the greater Pollitt family as well. Brick is an alcoholic; he, as well as Gooper and Mae, has been cut from Big Daddy's will. Big Daddy doesn't like Maggie, at one point even telling Brick, “if you don't like Maggie, get rid of her” (85). Big Daddy even admits to not liking his own wife very much, though he readily admits he enjoys sleeping with her. Furthermore, Big Daddy says that he sees no issues with frequently cheating on his wife, even telling Brick that he intends to get himself some women on the side and “hump them from hell to breakfast” (98). What's ironic about Big Daddy's behavior is that, for being such a chauvinist himself, he nonetheless seems critical of the choices Brick makes, especially when it comes to his drinking. Big Daddy tells Brick that his drinking

is “disgusting” and says that “a man that drinks is throwing his life away” (85). In a conversation with Brick, Big Daddy reflects on the unhappiness of his own life of lies and “Pretenses! ... *I've* lived with mendacity! Why can't *you* live with it?” (110-111). Brick responds by saying that he lives for liquor. Big Daddy suggests, “That's not living ... why don't you kill yourself, man?” (111). With a father like this, Brick and Maggie's treatment of themselves and each other becomes more understandable, if not even psychologically justified. Like Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the dysfunction of the family extends well beyond the perimeters of the married couples.

The idea of men not truly caring for their wives and playing the role of self-centered chauvinists in Williams' pieces has been contended by readers and critics of Williams' plays for decades, and many disagree as to how the treatment of Brick Pollitt by his father can be explained. While some say that it is Brick's latent homosexuality that causes Big Daddy to leave Brick out of his will, others say that it is really Big Daddy's conservative view toward liquor that influences his decisions regarding the estate. Williams writes Big Daddy's words:

A little while back when I thought my number was up... I thought about you. Should or should I not, if the jig was up, give you this place when I go – since I hate Gooper an' Mae an' know that they hate me, and since all five same monkeys are little Maes and Goopers. – And I thought, No! – then I thought, Yes! – I couldn't make up my mind. I hate Gooper and his five same monkeys and that bitch Mae!  
(112)

Bibler comments on this passage of *Cat*, saying, “Big Daddy dreads the lineage that would stem from Gooper because he and Gooper are different, and he doesn't even consider Gooper's wife as part of that lineage. Brick, on the other hand is

clearly Big Daddy's 'kind,' which would make him eligible for full inheritance if it weren't for his alcoholism" (112).

Bibler's contention then is that it is not Brick's questionable sexuality, but rather his drinking that causes Big Daddy to question his decisions regarding the estate. Furthermore, Williams leaves nothing questionable about Brick's drinking, like he does with Brick's sexuality. Brick admits, "That's the truth, Big Daddy. I'm alcoholic" (*Cat* 101), an admission that reflects back on Williams himself, who was both an alcoholic and a sexual miscreant. As Bauer-Briski writes, "Williams said, 'I don't want naked bodies in my plays. I want naked minds and naked hearts.' In order to expose these best, he created characters who are sexual deviates. He felt he could identify with them particularly well, as he considered himself to be one of them" (13).

Like McCullers, Williams' struggles with his own alcoholism and homosexuality are reflected in his plays, especially *Cat* and *Streetcar*. In his own life, Williams had numerous sexual partners and led what Bauer-Briski calls, "an extremely promiscuous life" (11). She cites interviews with Williams' long-time partner, Donald Spoto, who often spoke of Williams' need to consume one sexual partner after another, much as other people consume food. Bauer-Briski writes, "Motivated by his extreme carnal urges and his enormous fear of loneliness, Williams, over the years, hired dozens of traveling partners and other companions. Just as he could not see harm in having 'side-dishes,' he had a lifelong fascination with prostitutes, and never did understand why bringing a hooker to a fancy dinner party wasn't good form" (12).

This confusion about what is sexually appropriate can clearly be seen in *Cat*, when Brick himself admits that he is “disgusted by gay men” (121), but then asks why “men can’t be good friends and not be gay” (122). Furthermore, in an interview with Arthur Waters in 1955, Williams himself said, “Brick is definitely not a homosexual” (Bauer-Briski 240). Bauer-Briski dedicates an entire section of her book to what she calls “Brick’s Problems with Sexuality.” She is convinced, both from her own reading of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and cited interviews with Williams, that Brick is indeed heterosexual – even if he is a poor excuse for a good husband. However, other readers of *Cat*, including me, don’t find the issue to be so clearly black and white, even with Williams’ admissions; I’m simply not quite willing to believe Williams is telling the truth about his protagonist. Brick’s relationship with Skipper leaves the audience with a number of unanswered questions all revolving around the sexual relationship (or lack of it) between the two men. At many times, Maggie herself insinuates that she was an afterthought to Brick’s relationship with Skipper, and that, in order to preserve an image of social normalcy, Brick married her, but in reality, loved Skipper as something much more than a good friend.

This scenario sets up *Cat* as another fitting example of the Southern Gothic – much like McCullers’ work – as both Maggie and Brick feel isolated and alone, trapped in relationships that are unfulfilling and socially awkward. Bauer-Briski points out that Brick feels his relationship with Skipper was “more important to him than his present relationship with his wife” (226), and cites Williams’ play, in which he writes that Brick recalled his relationship with

Skipper as something which was “too rare to be normal” (*Cat* 89). Maggie complains that Skipper and Brick have spent their entire lives together and wanted it to stay that way. After admitting that she and Skipper once slept together, she admits that it was so that both she and Skipper could feel closer to Brick; they both apparently loved Brick, but neither felt he was responsive to the advances. To Maggie’s surprise, though, Brick already knows about the one-night-stand between his best friend and his wife, saying that in fact, he had heard about it directly from Skipper. Maggie then refers to Brick’s relationship with Skipper as “one of those beautiful, ideal things they tell about in Greek legends ... it was love that never could be carried through to anything satisfying or even talked about plainly” (*Cat* 58). After Brick tells her to stop, she continues, “Why I remember when we double-dated at college, Gladys Fitzgerald and I and you and Skipper, it was more like a date between you and Skipper. Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along as if it was necessary to chaperone you! – to make a good public impression...” Brick’s response to Maggie at this point is to threaten Maggie with violence and defend his relationship with Skipper: “Maggie, you want me to hit you with his crutch? Don’t you know I could kill you with this crutch? ... One man has one great good true thing in his life. One great good thing which is true – I had friendship with Skipper. – You are naming it dirty!” (*Cat* 59). As the scene continues, the intensity grows to levels which would undoubtedly frighten live audiences and make viewers and readers alike consistently uncomfortable. As Maggie continues to yell at Brick about Skipper, Brick attempts to hit Maggie, several times, with his crutch; she laughs,

maniacally at times, as Brick throws his crutch, swings at her, breaks lamps and other furniture and listens to Maggie's rants about Skipper's downfall as an alcoholic and his eventual death. As she screams, "Skipper is dead! I'm alive! Maggie the cat is – alive! I'm alive, alive! I am... alive!" (*Cat* 61). Brick falls down, having lost his balance after throwing his crutch at Maggie. As one of his nieces enters the room and asks what happened, he nonchalantly says, "I tried to kill your Aunt Maggie, but I failed – and I fell" (*Cat* 62).

What is more pervasive in the story than Brick's questionable sexuality, however, as both Bibler and I agree, is his alcoholism. Big Daddy's ambivalence toward the relationship between Peter Ochello and Jack Straw shows that he is ultimately not concerned with sexuality – even when it comes to his son. Even if Brick is gay, Big Daddy still likes him infinitely more than Gooper, Mae and their ill-behaved children, as evidenced in Big Daddy's tirade, when he says, "Pretend to love that son of a bitch of a Gooper and his wife Mae and those five same screechers out there like parrots in a jungle? Jesus! Can't stand to look at 'em!" (*Cat* 110). He goes on to explain to Brick, "*You, I do* like for some reason, did always have some kind of real feeling for – affection – respect – yes, always..." (*Cat* 111). Brick's questionable sexuality is never even mentioned in the tirade. For a man who has been so blatantly honest about his feelings toward Gooper and Mae and their "screechers," had he taken issue with Brick's sexuality, it presumably would have come out in this scene. The fact that it doesn't shows that it's simply not an issue for Big Daddy, who does directly address Brick's drinking: "But why in hell, on the other hand, Brick – should I subsidize a

goddamn fool on the bottle – Liked or not liked, well, maybe even – *loved!* – why should I do that? – Subsidize worthless behavior?” (*Cat* 112). Williams has made Big Daddy’s stance abundantly clear – he is hesitant to leave his inheritance to a drunk, even if that drunk is the son he admits to loving – a difficult admission, I’m sure, for such an abrasive man.

In the end, Maggie announces she is pregnant, though she is lying, and the audience learns of her plan to lock up Brick’s liquor and continue to sleep with him until she really *is* pregnant – a decision that shows her desire to be normal, to return to a sense of family values and mores that are supposed to be a part of the American Dream. For Maggie, the inheritance that she and Brick will potentially inherit from Big Daddy is only one part of a much larger puzzle. To live out the American Dream she really wants, she will have to have a baby, even if it is in dire circumstances with a man who can barely tolerate her and at times, seems to even loathe her.

Maggie says that after learning she is pregnant, she’ll give the liquor back to Brick, setting up the story to continue in an unbroken cycle of alcoholism and bad parenting, this time in the case of Brick and Maggie as opposed to Big Daddy and Big Mama. In fact, Maggie’s announcement that she wants to get pregnant is met with Brick’s comment, “But how in the hell on earth do you imagine – that you’re going to have a child by a man that can’t stand you?” It is Maggie’s response, “That’s a problem that I will have to work out” (*Cat* 63), which ends Act I and leaves the audience headed to intermission with a feeling of anxiety and

discontent that probably mirrored Williams' own experiences with isolation, loneliness and sexual restlessness.

It is these motifs of isolation, loneliness and sexual restlessness that Allan Lloyd-Smith addresses in his book, *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*. Recall from the introduction that Lloyd-Smith wrote of the "hallmarks of the Gothic," which included an author's willingness to push toward extremes and excess. He explained how the Gothic genre frequently challenged the "prescribed doctrines of morality and propriety" (5). The tone of sadness, madness and tension is firmly set in Tennessee Williams' plays, thus making them fitting examples of Gothic literature. Lloyd-Smith contends that many characters in Gothic literature are "freethinking characters" who are frequently "up to no good" and "proclaim their own superiority and inherent freedom as rational beings above the shibboleths of convention;" he continues, "Their prey are innocents who put their trust in the benevolence and right thinking of others, and it is not difficult to see in these contrasts that the Gothic is in essence a reactionary form, like the detective novel, one that explores chaos and wrongdoing in a movement toward the ultimate restitution of order and convention" (5). Though the plays of Tennessee Williams are frequently focused on negativity and broken relationships, they do, in many cases, strive for the "restitution of order and convention" about which Lloyd-Smith writes.

## Chapter 3

## Flannery O'Connor as a Southern Gothic Author: Debunking the Myths

## Surrounding

## “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and “Good Country People”

Like the works of Carson McCullers and Tennessee Williams, the works of Flannery O'Connor cannot be left out of discussions about the Southern Gothic genre, though in some cases, it may seem that she is a bit more of a “square peg” being forced into the proverbial “round hole.” It may not be quite as obvious on first glance why O'Connor should be included in the Southern Gothic discussions, but this chapter focuses primarily on debunking the myths that many critics use to try to convince their readers that she doesn't belong in the category. In looking at her two most popular stories, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and “Good Country People,” and linking the elements found in each story to the elements of Gothic Fiction – specifically Southern Gothic fiction – that have been discussed thus far, it is my contention that O'Connor not only belongs in the Southern Gothic category, but that her placement there should rarely, if ever, be questioned. In fact, Louis D. Rubin, Jr., in his essay “Two Ladies of the South” makes a connection between O'Connor and McCullers as well: “...both Miss O'Connor and Miss McCullers seem to share a strong artistic sympathy for the wretched, the deformed, the physical and mental misfits” (27). It is this type of connection, as well as O'Connor's use of other traditionally gothic elements, that will ultimately show her place as a Southern Gothic writer. Her characters

frequently challenge the ideas of American normalcy, often feel isolated and in many cases, struggle with their gender or identity.

I have worked to establish in the previous chapters that Southern Gothic writing emerged as its own category of literature because, though it deviated from traditional gothic writing in setting, it did not stray far from the elements of gothic fiction which had been initially established in Europe and eventually made their way to the American writers' pages. Like McCullers and Williams, O'Connor uses a number of these elements in her work and her writing is more Southern gothic than not. Her settings are in rural Southern towns and, in some cases, there are characters who are driven to commit crimes or violent acts. Though there are differences between O'Connor and McCullers and Williams, to separate O'Connor from the Southern Gothic genre would be inappropriate.

O'Connor used the term "interlectkchul" to refer to the "intellectual" writers who followed what she thought was an overused format; works such as *The Great Gatsby*, *A Farewell to Arms* and *Absalom, Absalom!* were what she called "tidily finished, neatly patterned [and] mythically ordered" (Friedman and Clark 3). This style of the so-called modernists was something O'Connor didn't like for her own writing. As one pair of critics put it, "She wrote understated, orderly, unexperimental fiction, with a Southern backdrop and a Roman Catholic vision, in defiance it would seem of those restless innovators who proceeded her and who came into prominence after her death" (Friedman and Clark 3-4). While McCullers and Williams showcased characters who felt isolated and were often abused, O'Connor's characters are firmly rooted in a place in which they more

accurately represent the Southern American social scene of the 1940s and '50s which was more relatable to her audiences. While McCullers' and Williams' characters are often in abusive relationships or are considered "freaks," O'Connor's characters are rarely trapped in a lifestyle as bleak as some of Williams' or McCullers' characters. For example, they rarely are sexually assaulted, vulgar or non-traditional in their sexuality, but they do experience feelings of isolation, social inadequacy, violence or dependence. There are also moments of suspense and mystery, and at times, the characters are downright frightened of their surroundings or other people. There is psychological terror as some characters meet their fate through violence. The characters are fictional people with fictional lives, but are also purposely designed by O'Connor herself to make a social statement about life in the South. Her stories frequently focus on race, social interactions and the disparity between social classes, and her characters engage in behaviors that at times seem absurd to the reader, but who nonetheless can make us think about the lifestyles of the Southern folks of the mid 1900s in new and thought-provoking ways.

Where O'Connor most veers from her Southern Gothic contemporaries is in her background as a Catholic writer. She was born Mary Flannery O'Connor in Savannah, Georgia in 1925, an only child, and raised as a devout Catholic in Milledgeville, Georgia. After graduating from an all-women's college in her home state, she traveled north to Iowa and acquired a Master's of Fine Arts from The State University of Iowa (now the University of Iowa). She later went to New York at age 23 and on to Connecticut, where she lived on a large farm owned by

Robert Fitzgerald, a writer himself. Her days were spent mainly in self-imposed isolation, writing during the day and conversing at night with Fitzgerald and his wife, Sally. Like McCullers and Williams, she wanted to remain gender neutral by name for the purpose of her writing; consequently, she dropped the “Mary” from her name and began publishing under the name Flannery O’Connor. Her friendships were many, but her contact with others – even those to whom she was close – was maintained primarily through handwritten letters rather than via face-to-face meetings. She never married and had no children. At the age of 25, she was diagnosed with Lupus, the same disease that had killed her father, and she ultimately died young, at the age of 39. Robert Fitzgerald called O’Connor a “shy, glum girl” and in an interview with her mother five years after her death, O’Connor was described by writer Josephine Hendin as one who “seems to have followed quite rigidly the code. Not the code of the Catholic church but the more rigorous, genteel womanhood, the code that forbids confession” (Hendin 11-12).

Hendin goes on to explain that O’Connor grew up in a very traditional Southern home. As an only child of a devoutly Catholic mother, she would have presumably grown up hearing phrases like, “Pretty is as pretty does” or “Don’t fuss.” Five years after Flannery O’Connor’s death, Hendin interviewed Flannery’s mother, Regina Cline O’Connor. It was Mrs. O’Connor who explained that Flannery was taught to be “nice to everyone and not tell anyone our business” (Hendin 12). That façade of always being nice, of creating the impression of a sweet, Southern girl – even when she didn’t feel that way – was something against which Flannery looked to rebel, even if it was only through the characters

in her fiction. For the O'Connors, the Southern way is "a politeness that engulfs every other emotion, that permits no contact on any but the most superficial levels" (Hendin 12). The fact that Flannery O'Connor came from a higher, more aristocratic Southern background separates her from McCullers and Williams in an important way. While O'Connor would have potentially "thought twice" about insulting someone or sharing her true emotions (especially had she been insulted about her lifestyle choices), neither McCullers nor Williams would have batted an eye at putting someone in his or her place. An angry outburst for a fictional character in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" or "Good Country People" was one thing; a verbal remark made in bad taste to a real person was quite another.

O'Connor was never comfortable as a northerner, and as a result, she felt compelled to return to the South when her illness was discovered. In like manner, her writing seemed to always return to her Southern roots and she wrote about Southern settings, Southern characters and Southern quandaries. Yet many critics argue that her religious beliefs never really allowed her to fit into the Southern Gothic category. Douglas Robillard, Jr. in his introduction to *The World of Flannery O'Connor* writes, "Many reviewers tried to place O'Connor in a convenient pigeon-hole labeled 'Southern Gothic' suggesting that her work was a pale imitation of William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, and, less favorably, Erskine Caldwell..." The insinuation is that O'Connor is not, then, a Southern Gothic writer. This is, however, where I wholeheartedly disagree. Despite her Catholic upbringing and her recurring themes of redemption and grace, she is very much a Southern Gothic writer, and her work *does* imitate the

styles, themes and messages of Faulkner, McCullers, Capote and Williams.

O'Connor resents the northern condescension that tries to judge the southern ways and attitudes that are predominant in her fiction. Though some might say that her growing up as a Catholic in a predominantly Protestant part of America – a part of the nation actually referred to as “The Bible Belt” – made her stand out as unusual, O'Connor is not in her real life a “freak” – as McCullers and Williams were often called. But there are some “freaks” in her stories, and many of them have the same issues, fears and insecurities that Faulkner's, McCullers' and Williams' characters experience. It is these characters that then should allow O'Connor to be discussed in the same literary realm as other Southern Gothic writers.

In her first published collection of short stories titled, *A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories*, O'Connor presents a series of stories, but the most well-known are “A Good Man is Hard to Find” (sharing its title with the collection itself) and “Good Country People.” Within these stories, O'Connor used the names of many real towns in Georgia. However, when she uses the name Timothy for a town in which the grandmother and her family stop for lunch, her motives are questioned. Some critics say that her abandonment of real city names for the use of the fictional ones has a religious implication. For example, Hallman B. Bryant writes in his essay “Reading the Map in ‘A Good Man is Hard to Find,’” “there is no town of Timothy in Georgia ... My theory is that in this scene, which has strong moral intention, O'Connor selected the name Timothy for the ironic effect it would produce. The allusion here is not geographical but

Biblical, and the Timothy alluded to is almost certainly the book in the New Testament which bears the same name ... More than any other writing in the New Testament, the letters to Timothy are concerned with Christian orthodoxy” (75). I would argue, though, that few readers of her work would jump to the Biblical conclusion Bryant makes for “A Good Man is Hard to Find.” Perhaps O’Connor simply chose the name Timothy because she liked it, or because there was someone she knew with the name and she associated that particular person with the goodness of the American South. The religious points are moot for me, but I do see moments of the same vulnerability, isolation, distrust and dependence in O’Connor’s work that is prominent in the works of McCullers and Williams. As Josephine Hendin put it in her book *The World of Flannery O’Connor*, “O’Connor would use the trappings of Southern life, but make them explode in unexpected directions” (131). Those “unexpected directions” are no different than the plot twists and turns on which McCullers and Williams frequently take their readers.

While many literary scholars see O’Connor’s work as religious in nature, specifically as it applies to the themes of redemption and grace, I see it, much as Hendin does, as work that can be interpreted in a number of ways. O’Connor’s work is, like so many other pieces of literature, subjective in nature. While it certainly *can* be read as having religious themes and motifs – even Hendin acknowledges that readers cannot divorce O’Connor’s faith from the context of her life – the work can also be read “not for the dogma it illustrates, but for the themes it suggests” (Hendin 17). Hendin concludes her discussion of O’Connor

with an observation that is heavily reflective of my own. She writes, “My own feeling is that O’Connor never merely wrote about Redemption, but that the very act of writing was itself a redemptive process for her. It may have been the only, and perhaps unconscious, way she could express all the contradictions within her” (17). For O’Connor, the process of writing was therapeutic because she was forced to deal with her life-threatening disease, something which, in addition to religious beliefs which were unconventional in Milledgeville, Georgia, separated her even further from her Southern kin.

O’Connor’s short story, “A Good Man is Hard to Find” was initially published in Avon’s *Modern Writing* in September 1953, and has become what is considered to be the quintessential O’Connor story. In the introduction to an edited version of the collection, *A Good Man is Hard to Find* released in 1993, author Frederick Asals writes that O’Connor was fascinated by the South, but unlike previous authors like Faulkner and his contemporaries, she was not interested in the Civil War or its effects on the Southern people. Instead, O’Connor focused on looking back at the South itself, without considering the antebellum years. Asals explains that O’Connor was more fascinated by the fact that even a hundred years after the end of the Civil War, Southerners were still enamored with the event. Asals writes, “The ultimate result of this sentimental backward-looking, ‘A Good Man’ implies, is such a figure as The Misfit, a man thrust into the moral and metaphysical vacuum that results in part from self-serving nostalgia” (9). The fact that the character who creates the deathly disaster for the grandmother and her family is called The Misfit helps to plunge

O'Connor's characters into the realm of the Southern gothic alongside characters like McCullers' Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams or Williams' Blanche DuBois or Maggie Pollitt – all misfits themselves.

O'Connor frequently read the story aloud when she was invited to speak to college writing groups or book clubs, and O'Connor herself said that *A Good Man* was the story which was “not grotesque at all, but rather, literal” (*Mystery* 113). The story centers around a grandmother and her son, Bailey, as well as his three children, who are murdered as they travel from Florida to Tennessee. O'Connor once said that “Violence is strangely capable of returning my characters to reality and preparing them to accept their moment of grace,” (*Mystery* 112). According to O'Connor, the time at which people can most accept grace is when they die, and since the grandmother faces death directly in *A Good Man*, it is then clear that she has received grace, but according to O'Connor, it is The Misfit (the murderer himself) who is more worthy of grace than the grandmother who is the victim. In discussing the piece, O'Connor herself explained that she “didn't want to equate the Misfit with the devil” and that she hoped, as unlikely as it would seem, that “the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become” (*Mystery* 112-113). Simply put, he is more worthy than the grandmother because he needs redemption more than she does. Though some would say this idea is ridiculous, there are still others who maintain that *both* the grandmother and The Misfit earn their moment of grace – the grandmother when she dies and The Misfit when he finally admits in the last

line of the story that killing the woman was “no real pleasure in life” (O’Connor 51).

Much is made by literary critics of the relationship between O’Connor’s characters and their ultimate reception of grace and/or redemption, but I take issue with this stance simply because this relationship doesn’t seem clear in the stories themselves. What *does* seem clear is that the elements of gothic fiction *are* present and clear enough to discuss without having to rely on a literary critic to make them noticeable. For the purposes of this particular discussion, it’s important, then, to realize that although O’Connor’s relationship with God is a sticking point for many critics, it is simply not a focal point for me; however, I am not entirely alone. Critic Josephine Hendin also finds that O’Connor’s work is not as much about religion as her literary colleagues argue. She cites a number of authors in her own work, who seem to feel that religion and redemption are the two main components of virtually every, if not all of, O’Connor’s stories.

Hendin, however, feels that because O’Connor was ill at the time of her writing, the stories are not about redemption itself, but that the writing process was redemptive – it was a healing process that allowed O’Connor to express her insecurity and fear of death through her characters. Furthermore, while Hendin admits that O’Connor’s Catholicism cannot be completely ignored, she thinks, as I do, that it is not necessarily a main character in O’Connor’s stories, either. Hendin discusses those authors who feel that “Jesus Christ is finally the principal character in all Miss O’Connor’s fiction ... and her heroes’ confrontation with Him is the one story she keeps telling over and over again” (17), but Hendin

argues that, “O’Connor’s assertions of Christian orthodoxy do not accurately describe her art ... I think O’Connor told more than religious tales ... To assume that her work is merely a monologue on redemption is to see it only in part, to ignore much of its meaning, and to lose sight of the believer behind the belief” (16-17).

In O’Connor’s story “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” the readers are shown the grandmother’s weakness in her final moments before she is shot by The Misfit. She cries out, “Jesus! You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I’ll give you all the money I’ve got!” (O’Connor 50). The use of the grandmother’s calling out for Jesus can be read in two ways: 1.) the old woman, strong in her presumed southern faith (which is actually never mentioned or referenced directly in the story), calls out to Jesus as her savior and her protector, or 2.) as a curse word. If indeed the use of the word “Jesus” is meant to be a curse word, then the old woman’s blasphemy makes her ultimately no better or more ladylike than Mick Kelly, Frankie Addams or Blanche DuBois. Rubin, Jr. writes of the connections he sees between O’Connor and McCullers as well:

Some of the people in “*A Good Man is Hard to Find*” remind one forcibly of those unhappy folk who are described in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. The significant difference has to do with the matter of pathos. Through all the Carson McCullers’ writings runs the strain of the sentimental, of a vague, undefined yearning. As a novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is marred by the unresolved attitude on the part of the author. She is not sure whether to be ironic over the lonely plight of her misfits and adolescentism or to yearn with them for better things. At different times she does both. Flannery O’Connor, on the other hand, knows exactly where she stands, and so does

the reader. Never once is she sentimental about a character: this is the situation, this is the person, this is what happens. There is a great deal of compassion in her work, but it is always compassion for characters because they are human beings with human limitations, not because they have limbs missing or have lost their jobs or are otherwise discomfited. The moral consciousness that runs throughout the stories of “*A Good Man is Hard to Find*” can accept evil, but not try to find excuses for it. (27)

Rubin, Jr. also connects O’Connor’s writing to that of William Faulkner, specifically to his *As I Lay Dying*; he writes that like Faulkner’s characters, O’Connor’s people “confront spiritual and moral problems” and that they are “in their own times and situations, responsible agents, not trapped automatons” (26). In fact, in my own reading of “A Good Man,” the grandmother was ultimately responsible for the deaths of her family, as well as of her own death. Time and time again, she convinces Bailey to do as she desires, even if it is illogical or dangerous. Furthermore, when The Misfit stumbles upon the car accident and sees the grandmother, Bailey, the children and their mother on the side of the road, it is the grandmother who shrieks, “You’re the Misfit! ... I recognized you at once!” (O’Connor 44). Perhaps had she not been so forward with her recognition of the man she *knows* is a criminal, he would have left them alone. But her admission to the criminal that she knows who he is only gives him further reason to get rid of them; his logical fear of having been seen *and* recognized puts him in a bad situation. If they do get out of the situation alive and flee to the police, they surely will report that they saw him. The only option, then, is for The Misfit is to dispose of the family – especially the loud-mouthed grandmother. O’Connor does not leave her readers to jump to this conclusion on their own, either. She writes The

Misfit's reaction to the grandmother's admission of her realization: "It would have been better for all of you, lady, if you hadn't of reckernized me" (44).

Prior to the murder scene in "A Good Man is Hard to Find", the grandmother (who is never actually named) is presented by O'Connor as a "good Southern woman." She views herself as elegant and graceful, dedicated to her family and set in the traditional Southern ways of politeness, faith and a strong focus on her family. She wants to travel to East Tennessee "to visit some of her connections" (O'Connor 31). From the onset of the story, the reader is alerted to the existence of The Misfit, a man who has broken out of a federal prison in Florida and is headed directly toward the grandmother's town. She tells her son she "wouldn't take my children in any direction with a criminal like that aloose in it. I couldn't answer to my conscience if I did" (O'Connor 31). While it may appear the grandmother's desire is to keep her family free from harm, most readers can see that her real motive is to have her own way and travel to Tennessee; the presence of The Misfit only gives her an excuse to push for it even harder.

As if Murphy's Law was alive and well in the Southern states, the family agrees to drive to Tennessee, but they meet their impending doom when The Misfit appears on the road after Bailey drives the family car into a ditch. It should be noted that the only reason the family is even *on* the rural dirt road is because the grandmother remembers an old plantation house that she once visited as a child. She tells Bailey and the children that it had secret passages (an element of Gothic fiction settings) and a place where all the family silver was stashed "when

Sherman came through town.” Of course, the children are encouraged by her story and begin to push their father to take them to see the old mansion. He finally relents and agrees to veer off the main road so they can visit the old plantation. In doing so, they get into an accident; it is only after the car is totaled and the family is stranded that the grandmother realizes the house was actually in Georgia, and not in Tennessee as she had told Bailey.

Beverly Lyon Clark and Caroline M. Brown make the same observation about the grandmother that I did: her control over the language and her “southern charm” are what allow her to convince Bailey and the rest of the family to head to Tennessee in the first place. In addition, that control is what allows her to “whet the curiosity of her grandchildren” (214) by claiming that a mansion she wants to visit has a secret panel. But Clark and Brown make an observation that I didn’t initially see: The Misfit succeeds primarily because he “operates outside the grandmother’s cultural sphere of linguistic control. He demonstrates as much when he corrects her statements and when he fails to respond to her invocation of the ‘good man’... she even loses her voice with him, loses language altogether” (214-215). As you may recall, a main element of Gothic fiction is the female voice’s propensity to be dominated by that of a male; this is precisely what happens in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” when The Misfit literally quiets the female protagonist by first rendering her speechless and then, to the most extreme extent, by killing her.

Of course, the most predominant gothic element of “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is the murders themselves. Recall that in William Faulkner’s “A Rose for

Emily,” a classic Southern gothic text, the lovestruck Emily murders Homer Baron in an effort to keep him close to her. This fact is not stated in the text itself, but the clues Faulkner leaves about Emily allow the reader to infer the causes of Emily’s actions. In O’Connor’s “A Good Man,” there is again no stated reasoning for The Misfit’s decision to murder the grandmother, Bailey, the three children and their mother (who is also never named and remains a bit of a mystery – the readers never do know if she is Bailey’s wife, ex-wife, inlaw, etc.), but the question remains, “Why?” Without an explanation, the readers are left a bit confused, but the act of the murders themselves cannot be separated from the inherent violence that is so prevalent in other Gothic, and Southern Gothic, pieces.

Aside from the violent murders committed by The Misfit and his henchmen, there are also the elements of Gothic fiction that are more understated in “A Good Man is Hard to Find”: first, the males are the dominant figures. Second, the ultimate location is rural (and Southern) and the characters feel isolated, even though they are often surrounded by other townspeople or family members. Third, there is talk of the supernatural (though in this case it is more specifically about the Christian faith – but what is Christ for a story other than an apparition in which one believes but never really sees?) and finally, there is the presence of a “monster” – in this case a serial murderer.

In “Good Country People,” many of the same elements are again present as O’Connor creates characters and a storyline that is inherently southern gothic in nature. Like “A Good Man is Hard to Find” and the works of McCullers and

Williams which were discussed earlier, “Good Country People” revolves around loneliness, isolation, dependence and the ultimate scamming of a woman by a man who gets the better of her. The setting, a farm in Georgia, is presented at the beginning and both the Hopewell and Freeman families are shown as hard-working people who are, like the characters in “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” not the Southern aristocracy but also aren’t the poor and battered hillbilly folks of the bayou, either. Joy is another “misfit” or “freak” as the main character who does not fit into the social mold of a Southern lady. She is 32 years old, heavysset, unmarried and has no desire to settle down with a man or get married. Furthermore, she holds a PhD in philosophy, a degree which her mother, Mrs. Hopewell, finds useless and strange. She also has an artificial leg, which she received after a hunting accident at the age of ten, and spends the majority of the story stomping around the kitchen and making it well known to the other characters, as well as to the readers, that she enjoys being loud and obnoxious – quite the opposite of a charming, shy and quiet Southern lady who would have seen herself as a social outcast and would more than likely have been ashamed of herself for being both unattractive and having a prosthetic limb. And of course, it’s impossible to not see the irony of her name; “Joy Hopewell” is neither joyous nor hopeful. She is angry, callous and pessimistic. Her desire to change her name to Hulga because she believes it better suits her is, for all intents and purposes, a very good change. She is proud of the new name because in essence, she is proud of her identity, even if it is not the identity that her mother or Mrs. Freeman wishes she would assume.

Richard Giannone, in his book *Flannery O'Connor and the Mystery of Love*, says that Joy's desire to complete the PhD was a direct reaction to her feelings of inadequacy due to her "incomplete" body – destroyed by the hunting accident. He writes, "Her disdain finds comfort in grand pronouncements: 'If science is right, then one thing stands firm,' she marks with a blue pencil in a text, 'science wishes to know nothing of nothing'. Hulga spends years legitimizing her reproach of a world that she feels rejects her" (63). The rejection is exactly what makes her a freak – a character who is left behind much like the characters of McCullers' and Williams' stories. Hulga is in complete opposition to the ideal Southern lady found in other pieces of literature like Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, or even the characters of Mrs. Freeman's daughters Glynese and Carramae – whom Joy calls Glycerin and Caramel – in "Good Country People." O'Connor describes the sisters in the following way:

Glynese, a redhead, was eighteen and had many admirers; Carramae, a blonde, was only fifteen but already married and pregnant. She could not keep anything on her stomach. Every morning Mrs. Freeman told Mrs. Hopewell how many times she had vomited since the last report. Mrs. Hopewell liked to tell people that Glynese and Carramae were two of the finest girls she knew and that Mrs. Freeman was a lady and that she was never ashamed to take her anywhere or introduce her to anybody they might meet. Then she would tell how she had happened to hire the Freemans in the first place and how they were a godsend to her and how she had had them four years. The reason for her keeping them so long was that they were not trash. They were good country people. (272)

The use of the title in her description shows O'Connor's desire for her readers to see the Freeman sisters as quintessentially Southern – beautiful and well-sought after. They are presented as a clear juxtaposition to Joy. She is everything a

Southern Belle is *not* and O'Connor presents her as a freak or a misfit – making her in some ways very comparable to McCullers' Mick Kelly. For one, both girls are lacking in their faith – Joy is admittedly an atheist and is proud to announce it to Manley Pointer, the Bible Salesman with an obscenely phallic name; however, what she doesn't realize at the point of her admission is that Manley is just as lost in his faith as she is. One writer, Margaret Earley Whitt, author of *Understanding Flannery O'Connor* describes Joy saying, "Her mind is overdeveloped but her emotions governed by her weak heart are without exercise until the two days in which the story takes place" (77).

Joy is the complete opposite of her mother, who attempts very seriously to be a Southern belle, even trying to set up Joy with Manley, whom she feels is the epitome of Southern values. In a collection of reviews of O'Connor's work, Frederick Asals writes about Manley, "As he presents himself, he seems a living embodiment of Mrs. Hopewell's clichés. 'Honest,' 'sincere,' 'genuine,' 'simple,' 'earnest,' 'the salt of the earth,' with his Bible-quoting and his missionary aspirations, he convinces the girl that at last she is 'face to face with real innocence'" (Bloom ed. 100). In addition to being the opposite of her mother, Joy purposefully rejects everything her mother stands for, and yet, when Manley appears – the epitome of Mrs. Hopewell's southern values – he is the boy to whom Joy is drawn. She sees him as a challenge, no match for her earthly knowledge and genius. Both Manley and Joy are said to have a physical heart condition, something which Mrs. Hopewell sees as a link between the two of them that will bring them closer together. But in the end, Manley is not "good

country people” at all. The ill-fated meeting between Joy and Manley is set up, as O’Connor writes, “on account of all [they] have in common,” but as Asals comments,

all that they seem to have in common is a potentially fatal heart condition. Their apparent roles are a typical set of O’Connor antitheses – the academic and the country bumpkin, the sophisticate and that innocent, the cynical atheist and the naïve Christian – antitheses that reach their comic high point in the barn where, as the boy whines for a declaration of love, the girl gives him a crash course in nihilist epistemology. But in the sudden role reversal that takes place in that barn, we discover what a genuine doppelganger this Bible salesman is. (100)

In the end, Manley possesses none of the qualities that Mrs. Hopewell finds so appealing about him – he is a con artist, a drinker and a thief.

While on their picnic (with no food, ironically), Manley plays the part of the naïve, innocent, Christian boy perfectly. He acts surprised when Joy tells him she doesn’t believe in God, and when he kisses her, it “produced an extra surge of adrenalin in the girl” (O’Connor 286). By the time they are in the hayloft, Joy/Hulga still feels that she is the one in control and that she will be the one to turn Manley from the innocent Bible salesman into the “worldly educated” man whom Hulga is responsible for schooling; but it is Hulga who learns a difficult life lesson. Manley plays on her inability to see him for who he really is – a conman. As they kiss in the barn, Manley tells her that she has to say she loves him. She refuses at first, but even her false admission of love is brimming with condescension and belittling. She tells him, “You poor baby ... it’s just as well you don’t understand” (287) and then “we are all damned ... but some of us have taken off our blindfolds and see that there’s nothing to see” (287). At this point,

Hulga still doesn't catch on; she still believes that it is she who is in complete control of her situation with Manley. It is not until he asks her to show him where her leg detaches that she starts to feel uncomfortable and vulnerable. She agrees to remove it, but when she asks him to give it back, Manley refuses. He pushes her down and begins to kiss her again – a sexual advance for which Hulga is neither ready nor willing to accept.

Like the unwanted advances put on the women in Williams' dramas, O'Connor's protagonist is a female victim of a male assault. Manley has completely disarmed Hulga – without her leg, she can't get down the ladder from the hayloft. Completely void of any sense of control, she is trapped emotionally as well. He finally pulls away from her and reveals what he's been carrying in the valise. It is not full of Bibles, as Hulga had predicted, but rather contains a flask of whisky, pornographic playing cards and a number of items he had stolen earlier from other unsuspecting women who were drawn to his seemingly perfect Southern charm – the very same charm and false pretenses that allowed him to gain access into Mrs. Hopewell's home in the first place. Before he leaves her in the loft, isolated, frightened and without her leg (i.e. completely dependent on someone else for the first time in her adult life), Manley yells at Hulga: "And you needn't to think you'll catch me because Pointer ain't really my name. I use a different name at every house I call at an don't stay nowhere long. And I'll tell you another thing, Hulga ... you ain't so smart. I been believing in nothing ever since I was born!" (289). As he leaves, Mrs. Freeman and Mrs. Hopewell see him go, assume he was selling Bibles to the neighbors and remark on his simplicity: "I

guess the world would be better off if we were all that simple,” Mrs. Hopewell says; Mrs. Freeman’s reply, “Some can’t be that simple ... I know I never could” (O’Connor 291). It is these comments which close the story. The reader is left to figure out that the Southern ideal is non-existent for any of the characters in “Good Country People.”

Hulga’s downfall – much like that of Blanche DuBoise – is her pride. It is only when Manley tells Hulga that she is different, i.e. special, that she gives in to his request for her to remove her artificial leg and present herself as subservient and dependent on him. In the end, her brains are no match for his wits and she loses all ability to remain independent as she sits in the hayloft – what Whitt calls “the most romantic scene in all of [O’Connor’s] fiction” (77) – her glasses and artificial leg having been stolen by Manley just before he reveals his true intentions and disappears across the fields in which Mrs. Hopewell and Mrs. Freeman continue to work, oblivious to Hulga’s plight. In Robert Coles’ book, *Flannery O’Connor’s South*, published in 1980, the author dedicates an entire chapter to the southern intellectual found in O’Connor’s Southern-set stories. He says O’Connor’s personal dislike of the Northern intellectualism is essentially given complete control of the story through Hulga’s character: “[O’Connor] spoofs Hulga’s braininess, shows it wanting in a struggle with a devilishly intuitive country salesman, but in the end, makes clear her conviction that there are worse ones around than the Hulgas of the world. She has flirted with nihilism, with the Devil. Her visitor *is* the Devil ... [and] before we come to that final moment of ironic circularity, we experience its predecessor – Hulga’s wrong-

headed condescension” (140) – the very condescension that O’Connor herself hated so much.

O’Connor shares Hulga’s inner monologue with the reader throughout the story and it is that reader who is led to believe that it is Hulga’s intention to seduce Manley, to use her brains to overcome him in the hayloft. She does not have the southern charm or the beauty to attract him, but her self-reliance and intelligence (at least as she perceives it) will be enough to outsmart him because in her eyes, he is nothing but a dumb salesman; however, when the tables are turned and it is Hulga who is fooled by Manley, the readers are shown that brains and intellectualism are no match for Manley’s ability to scam Hulga and trick her into having to rely completely on him. As Giannone writes:

Manley Pointer puts Hulga’s highfalutin nay-saying to the test. He is a nineteen-year-old Bible salesman with seventy-seven books sold in only four months. Manley falls just short of the twenty-some years it takes Hulga to refine her philosophical position, but he, a fast learner, has a riper, more impelling nihilism. The salesman knows firsthand that in a desperately threatened world, the way to succeed is to hold yourself just below the image others have of themselves. One gains power by allowing others superiority. ‘I’m just a country boy,’ Manley assures Mrs. Hopewell, who descends to the occasion of his entreaty: ‘Why I think there aren’t enough good country people in the world!’ (63).

Manley is, in many ways, smarter than Hulga, even with her PhD. He is able to convince her to let her guard down and submit to him; all her intelligence is simply no match for Manley’s real-world experience.

The readers of O’Connor’s work may indeed have a difficult time determining who the real heroes of the stories are – if any can even be identified.

In “Good Country People,” the reader begins to feel sympathy for Hulga at the end. Even with her stomping around and loud, obnoxious behavior, one cannot help but feel bad for her after she is seduced and left isolated and frightened by Manley, a situation which is inherently gothic in nature. Hulga is ultimately destroyed by Manley; her inability to function as a woman who had all along believed herself to be independent, brilliant and self-reliant is a life-altering change for Hulga. In fact, Claire Kahane, author of “Gothic Mirrors and Feminine Identity” seems to write about Hulga directly when she says, “the real Gothic horror is that the heroine seems compelled either to resume a more quiescent, socially acceptable role, or to be destroyed” (Kahane 54). The destruction of Hulga *is* gothic in nature – especially because it happens at the hands of a man. Furthermore, Kahane explains that the distorted body image, which is certainly applicable to Hulga, is another aspect of a redefined gothic genre – something which we are absolutely creating with the emergence of a Southern Gothic category of its own. Clark and Brown, who comment extensively on Kahane’s work, say that “Modern radical gothic (not the popular drugstore variety) typically allows no escape from the Gothic experience but destruction. Modern Gothic also unveils what has been cloaked in mystery, grotesque images of self-hatred” (Clark and Brown 219). Kahane says the modern Gothic is “when the unseen is given visual form, when we lose the obscurity of the Gothic center, the Gothic turns into the Grotesque, into a focus on distorted body-images, as so much of what we call Gothic illustrates” (*Gothic Mirrors* 55). Both Clark and Brown, as well as Kahane, agree that O’Connor is part of the redefining process for traditional

Gothic. She aims to “penetrate a central truth,” but adds a modern Gothic flair by “giving the truth a grotesque form” (Clark and Brown 219).

The fact is, quite clearly, that Flannery O’Connor’s work cannot be separated from that of the other writers who have collaborated to essentially create the Southern gothic genre. The characters are vengeful, isolated, frightened and violent. Her work is not Christ-centered, as many critics contend. It is haunted by Christ, yes, but the message is not so blatant that the average reader will be able to pick up on it. Author Carol Shloss says, that “O’Connor infrequently enunciates in her fictional world what she had no trouble conveying in personal life – that Christian orthodoxy was the consistent measure of experience. This is usually left for the reader to infer, to come upon through the indirections of allusion, incongruities, and distorted hyperbole” (66). In the same collection as Shloss’ piece is an essay by Jefferson Humphries which claims exactly my point: “The criminals of Miss O’Connor’s world, monsters remarkable in the reality, doers of violence not to themselves directly, but to the unbelieving world which offers no other issue to the striving of their spirits, destroy and torment for the pleasure of spite, which is no pleasure at all ... They destroy in desperation and rage at their own belief” (118).

O’Connor’s characters are angry, hateful, spiteful and vindictive people who live in remote Southern towns and are considered “freaks” by those around them because they do not adhere to traditional Southern values or the code of Southern hospitality which is presumed to be the proper way of life. Furthermore, O’Connor targets those people who merely appear to uphold traditional Southern

values, but who really are the ones who rebel against it most. O'Connor does what few other authors can do – satirize the very people with whom she herself is associated, and do it in a way that is understated and savvy. Some characters, like Hulga, are physically deformed and conjure similar images of gothic figures of the past like bolt-headed Frankensteins, hunchbacked bell-ringers of Notre Dame and sharp-fanged Draculas. Others are labeled as misfits, most notably *The Misfit* himself. The story lines are, at times, psychologically thrilling and have an air of suspense and mystery, and in many cases the characters experience violent outbursts and sexual assault. Females are made to be subservient to their male counterparts and innocence is often lost as the powers of “evil” subdue the powers of “good.” While it may not seem at first glance that O'Connor deserves a spot in the Southern Gothic genre, once her work is analyzed and critiqued using the same criteria as other Southern Gothic writers, it would be difficult – and wrong – to leave her out of the discussion.

## Conclusion

### Completing the Southern Gothic Puzzle

Without question, the most difficult task of this research process was attempting to answer my initial question: “Which came first, the works of McCullers, Williams and O’Connor or the Southern Gothic genre in which they are now included?” While the task was challenging, it was also rewarding, and I am fairly certain that my answer is concrete. While the Gothic Literature of Europe and America had been identified and categorized already, it took another hundred years for the Southern Gothic to even begin to develop, and even then, the process was slow. There was no real genre to which authors like Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams or Flannery O’Connor could adhere and feel “at home.” To say they were “Fiction Writers” would have been accurate, but also so broad that it wouldn’t have given them any real title or sense of belonging. Their methods of writing were very different – novels, dramas and short stories, respectively – but grouping each of them with those who wrote in similar styles would have also been inaccurate. Carson McCullers’ novels are nothing like those of F. Scott Fitzgerald (though there is a slightly Gothic twist to Fitzgerald’s most famous work when Gatsby ends up dead in a swimming pool in the famous novel, *The Great Gatsby*), John Steinbeck or Ernest Hemingway; Tennessee Williams cannot be lumped together with August Wilson or Lorraine Hansberry; and Flannery O’Connor is certainly no Mark Twain or Ambrose Bierce. While vastly different in format, however, the common thread that sews the works of

McCullers, Williams and O'Connor together is the presence of the elements of traditional Gothic fiction – but with a Southern American flair.

As Eric Savoy said in his essay “The Rise of American Gothic,” “The gothic, as it is frequently reasoned, embodies and gives voice to the dark nightmare that is the underside of the American dream,” (167). For McCullers, Williams and O'Connor, nothing could be closer to the truth. The characters found in their pieces are social outcasts – strange people who are seldom considered to be part of mainstream America and who, in many cases, take the traditional ideas of “American normalcy” and turn them upside down. Much like the authors themselves, characters like Mick Kelly, Frankie Addams, Brick Pollitt, Blanche DuBois, Joy Hopewell and The Misfit all are searching for something, though in most cases, unlike the traditional “American Dream” stories, they are unable to find it. Perhaps like the authors themselves, the characters are left disappointed and isolated. They are seldom accepted by the other members of their communities and are in many cases, even shunned away. Whether it be because of their sexual orientation, physical deformities or simply because they are breaking the rules that are considered to be stereotypically gender-traditional (i.e. Mick Kelly’s anti-feminine clothes or language), the characters in Southern gothic works are brought together into the same category because they all rebel against a code of American “normalcy.”

So many of the elements of traditional Gothic fiction, with its roots in Britain and its branches in America, are present in the works of McCullers, Williams and O'Connor that it would be wrong to leave them out of discussions

about Gothic literature. Yet because each of these authors chose to put a more Southern spin on his or her writing, a new sub-category of literature was established, presumably against the writers' knowledge. It wasn't until critics and readers sat down with these works and realized that the thematic elements of gothic literature were present in all of these authors' works, albeit with a slightly varied edge. Allan Lloyd-Smith discussed what exactly this "edge" was in his book *American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction*. He begins his book by talking about how the entire idea of the American Dream is predicated on the assumption that the valiant American present can restore the mistakes of America's past. But he continues by saying that it is the Gothic that turns this idea upside-down, especially when it comes to the Southern Gothic genre. He writes, "The legacy of the South reaches up into the North in such fictions, but in the South there was a sense of history turning in upon itself as writers evoked a string of distorted figures trapped in structures that had lost their authority but not their power" (Lloyd-Smith 121). As he goes on to describe the works of William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote, he says "the neurotic, declining South is explored through the grotesques that it throws up. Eudora Welty, Robert Penn Warren and Walker Percy add to the list of Southern Gothicists after Faulkner, but the most powerful of them is Flannery O'Connor, who created grotesque people and situations born of – but in excess of – their southern context" (Lloyd-Smith 122).

Recall that the settings of traditional gothic pieces, including Horace Walpole's "The Castle of Otranto" and Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," were

usually in a castle. When authors like McCullers, Williams and O'Connor changed the setting to be remote Southern towns or deserted plantation houses, the backdrop had been altered, but the idea was inherently the same: people were no longer physically isolated, but were emotionally detached from others and experienced mental isolation and loneliness. Coupled in *some* cases with the physically remote locations, the characters who are shunned and alone are simply more modern representations of the gothic characters established with the original gothic pieces of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even in settings which are not physically isolated, there are still remnants of the original gothic settings. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," recall that the grandmother wants to visit the old plantation house, and that part of her persuasive rhetoric to her grandchildren includes a description of the secret passageways hidden inside. It is not the historical value or the fact that the home was hiding silver "when Sherman's army came through" but rather the mystery and suspense that surrounds the secret panels which most intrigues the children and causes them to convince Bailey to turn off the beaten path and onto the road which ultimately leads to the family's grisly demise.

In addition, the works of McCullers, Williams and O'Connor all offer a sense of mystery and suspense, another element found in the original gothic pieces and carried through to the more modern American counterparts. There is a threatening feeling, a fear enhanced by the unknown, in both the old gothic stories of Europe as well as the newer gothic stories in America. That fear, like the remote settings, carries through to the Southern gothic as well; even the readers

experience it. For readers of McCullers' work, there is fear surrounding the relationship between Singer and his homosexual lover in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. We fear for Mick Kelly and her acceptance into mainstream society. The same is true for Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding*. Each of these young women are social outcasts, and we as readers are left suspended as we wait for the stories' resolutions. The same is true for the characters in Williams' dramas. The audiences of both "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" wait anxiously to see if Brick will hit Maggie or Blanche, or if Stella and Stanley Kowalsky will ever really be "normal." And of course, O'Connor cannot be left out here, either. As *The Misfit* approaches, foreshadowed by the grandmother's discussion of him earlier that morning, the readers know that something grotesque is likely to happen. As a reader, you are likely to hope that he moves on and leaves the family alone. You read with anticipation and expectation that *The Misfit* will recoil and the grandmother and her family will be spared; but then, it wouldn't be gothic if he did. The gothic is about the fear and anxiety coming to fruition until the climax of the story, when there is some event – in the case of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the shooting of the grandmother and her family – that alleviates the fear with a solution, even if it is seldom a happy solution. In fact, Lloyd-Smith comments on the ending of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," saying that "O'Connor's mordant wit – if it should be called humor at all – seems based on a view not all that far from 'Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God'; if religion *were* to be taken seriously, the consequences must be terrifying" (123).

Where the original gothic pieces are littered with omens, prophecies, ghosts and goblins, the modern gothic, and especially the Southern gothic, is full of the ghosts of history, religion and social stigma. Perhaps Savoy best understands this dilemma when he questions who the main character of the Southern gothic pieces really is. He argues that in some cases, it is history itself which is the main protagonist, what he calls, “the shadow of history itself, whether that shadow is understood as an inherited state of mind or the emergence of a ghostly phantom from the depths of the historical psyche” (174). Catherine Spooner, in her essay “Gothic in the Twentieth Century” says it another way when she writes, “It is at the ghosts within that we shudder, and not at the decaying bodies of barons or the subterranean activities of ghouls” (39). It is certainly these “ghosts within” and the personal histories of the characters in McCullers’, Williams’ and O’Connor’s pieces which come back to haunt them, especially those who are perpetually living in the shadows of their antebellum south and are expected to retain a certain amount of Southern decency and moral value while still reconstructing their own lives to meet the demands of a progressive America who would be tolerant of alternative lifestyles and sexuality. This can be seen especially in the Tennessee Williams pieces discussed earlier.

In addition to the idea of the omens and prophecies is the idea of the supernatural or otherwise inexplicable events. While there *isn't* necessarily the emergence of magic or ghosts in the works of McCullers, Williams and O’Connor, there certainly *is* the presence of religion and faith – or discussions between characters about the lack of it. Joy Hopewell’s conversation with Manley

about their lack of belief in a God in “Good Country People” or the grandmother’s insistence and pleas for help from Jesus in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” show the presence of a higher power, something which cannot always be seen, but is frequently discussed, honored or purposely ignored.

Perhaps one of the most important elements of early gothic literature that carried through to the modern Southern gothic is the presence of high and overwrought emotion. The Tennessee Williams chapter references the famous “Steelllllllaaaa” scene in the film version of “A Streetcar Named Desire” – quite possibly the perfect on-screen example of overwrought emotion as Stanley yells for his beloved, yet abused and emotionally traumatized wife. Brick and Maggie Pollitt are vulnerable, volatile characters as well, and their toxicity is only heightened when Gooper and Mae are around to argue about Big Daddy’s money. The arguments and altercations between the characters in Williams’ works are some of the most impassioned scenes in American drama. The same can be said for O’Connor’s work as the grandmother puts her foot firmly down in the family decision-making process. In the car on the way to the abandoned house, Bailey yells at her, thoroughly tired of her constant nagging and giving of orders. Again, the turbulence can be seen in McCullers’ works as Singer and Antonapoulos fight (though in a very different way because Singer is a mute). Antonapoulos is aggressive and abrasive, another prime example of a dramatic, overemotional character that is so visible in the gothic genre.

Finally, the position of women as people who are subservient to their male counterparts and are often abused, isolated and angry is a feature which was

certainly not left behind by modern gothic writers. The original gothic writers tended to put women in distressed situations so as to evoke sympathy from readers. The same can be said of the female characters in the later southern gothic pieces discussed here. The women are often found fainting, screaming, arguing and/or sobbing. They are frequently abused, both physically and emotionally, and this abuse usually occurs at the hands of a male. The women have been left alone – either unintentionally or on purpose – and rarely have a protector to keep them safe. The males have the power to dominate the women sexually, emotionally and mentally and very often, the men are driven to maddening levels of anger, hostility and aggression – all of which is blamed on the women who “force them” to be that way. The men are tyrannical and are often demanding of their wives, telling them what to do, where to go or how to live their lives. The women are forced to remain in loveless marriages or to have sex with men whom they do not love but to whom they are forced to remain loyal. In fact, in some cases, the appeal of sex and love has been so corrupted by the men that the women don’t even see the abuse happening. In Williams’ “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” Maggie is so anxious to have a child that she plans to continue having sex with her alcoholic husband until she’s pregnant; her thoughts never seem to shift to the lack of a healthy home for the child nor to the safety of herself or the baby who is presumably to come.

For authors like Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams and Flannery O’Connor, the genres of literature that already existed at the time of their writing simply wouldn’t suffice. They each knew how they felt and how they wanted to

write, but only the American Gothic genre seemed to fit their needs. And yet, something was still amiss. McCullers, Williams and O'Connor were haunted by their own past – a history that pervaded every aspect of themselves as writers. As Savoy says, “Gothic texts return obsessively to the personal, the familial, and the national past to complicate rather than clarify them, but mainly to implicate the individual in a deep morass of American desires and deeds that allow no final escape from or transcendence of them” (169). The Southern Gothic provided an answer to writers looking for an answer to the cultural restlessness they felt as a result of their being different. Each of these authors had a personal story to tell and was only allowed to do it through characters who would seem as “freakish” as the authors themselves, but it wasn't until their writing was accepted as a genuine genre that the Southern Gothic was truly born.

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## ABSTRACT

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This research focuses on the works of Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams and Flannery O'Connor, three authors who worked to propel some of America's most famous literary iconoclasts to the forefront. While many writers would attempt to push these types of characters to the wayside in favor of more "traditional" characters, it is the most abnormal and freakish people who take the spotlight for McCullers, Williams and O'Connor. As the three consciously strived to showcase iconoclastic characters in their fiction, they also inadvertently created what no other group of authors had done before: split the already well-established genre of American Gothic literature into a more specific and tailored Southern Gothic subgenre. The research is primarily centered around the novels, dramas and short stories of McCullers, Williams and O'Connor, but it also utilizes research from literary critics, interviews with the authors themselves and a number of literary journals, articles, and editor's notes. The focus of this thesis is then to show how McCullers, Williams and O'Connor redefined the Gothic genre and broke the rules surrounding "traditional" Gothic tropes in order to create a new and fascinating world known as The Southern Gothic.