

An Analysis of Gender Binarism in McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

XIONG Yu-zhi

School of International Studies, Zhejiang University, Hangzhou, P. R. China

This paper provides an analysis of gender binarism in Carson McCullers' novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, situated within the socio-cultural milieu of Southern America. It examines the depiction of persisting challenges posed by binary gender paradigms and the portrayal of potential emancipation within the narrative. The analysis focuses on two central characters, interpreting them as contrasting cases. One character represents the paradox inherent in the rebellious endeavors, highlighting how these actions, influenced by Phallocentrism and a broader framework of hierarchical structures, might inadvertently reinforce gender binarism. The other character exemplifies a triumphant departure from the binary gender paradigm through striving to attain a state of equilibrium marked by the harmonious coexistence of gender differences. Through this analysis, the paper reveals the author's dual perspectives in her exploration of gender binarism using these two distinct protagonists. At last, it employs the traditional Chinese philosophical concept of "harmony in diversity" in conjunction with feminist and gender theories to elucidate the encouraged path toward emancipation from gender binarism within McCullers' narrative.

Keywords: gender binarism, Phallocentrism, harmony in diversity, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Carson McCullers

Introduction

Carson McCullers' inaugural novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), constitutes a thorough and vivid literary depiction of the quandaries engendered by gender binarism within the Southern American milieu. This representation primarily revolves around two central characters, Mick Kelly, a female adolescent exhibiting tomboyish characteristics, and Biff Brannon, the owner of a local town cafe who embodies traits of a non-binary gender identity. Notably, this narrative underscores the prospects of transformation, notwithstanding the considerable obstacles it faces.

Scholars have conducted comprehensive investigations into gender themes within *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. Early feminist analyses have interpreted Mick Kelly as a representation of the struggle associated with the ambiguous gender identity of female adolescent and the oppressive Southern womanhood (Westling, 1985; Perry, 1986; González-Groba, 1994). Subsequent examinations have delved into various themes, including female adolescence, queerness, homosexuality, masquerade, and androgyny, all within the framework of

grotesque studies through a post-structuralist lens (Gleeson-White, 2001, 2003). In this context, gender grotesque bodies were interpreted as transgressions against the binary gender norms, serving as revolutionary sites for transformation (Gleeson-White, 2003, p. 26). Nevertheless, certain critics have posited counterargument that labeling these queer bodies with grotesque discourse implicitly marginalizes queerness (Free, 2008). Alternative perspectives have been brought forth through the lenses of disability studies and linguistic analyses, wherein the silence of certain characters is construed as symbolic of gender-based oppression, and Mick's music is seen as the disembodied alternative to traditional male interpretations (Martin, 2009). Additionally, the portrayal of the deaf and mute character Singer has been examined as a representation of a "feminist listener" (Waggoner, 2017/2018).

Existing scholarly inquiries have extensively explored the endeavors of characters in challenging the binary gender framework. However, these investigations often overlook the a nuanced paradox inherent in how the narrative navigates these efforts: in certain instances, these actions inadvertently contribute to the perpetuation of gender binarism. This paper aims to examine both the depiction of intricate predicaments generated by gender binarism and the representation of potential emancipation within the narrative. As a culmination of these two analytical components, the author's exploration of gender binarism centered on the two primary characters will be scrutinized. An intercultural perspective, drawing from traditional Chinese philosophical concepts, will operate as an auxiliary analytical tool in conjunction with feminist and gender theories, aiming to facilitate a deeper understanding of the text.

Predicaments Faced by Mick Kelly Within the Gender Binary Framework

Mick Kelly, who embodies the archetype of the adolescent tomboy in McCullers' literary corpus, has been analyzed by feminists as emblematic of the constraints inherent in the process of maturing into womanhood within the Souther context (Westling, 1985; Perry, 1986; González-Groba, 1994). More recently, Gleeson-White (2001, 2003) has expanded this interpretation by casting this tomboy character as a manifestation of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "grotesque", introducing the dynamic qualities of gender fluidity that challenge established boundaries for women. Nevertheless, Mick's endeavors to rebel against gender binarism are ensnared in intricate predicaments imposed by the naturalized Phallocentrism and other prevailing hierarchical structures.

One of the predicaments pertains to an actually static gender performance. As articulated by Judith Butler contends, gender is construed as performative, instituted in an external space through the stylization of the body and the repetitive behaviors over time (Butler, 1999, pp. 179-180). In the case of Mick, her choice of clothing, functioning as a form of masquerade, serves as an enduring conflict between two opposing poles of masculinity and femininity. Mick adopts a polarized stance, manifesting a desire to "wear either a real man's evening suit or a red dress spangled with rhinestones" (McCullers, 1993, p. 205) for her dreamed orchestra. Within this binary framework, she predominantly aligns herself with masculine performance, evident in her boyish appearance, the adoption of a male nickname, and the exhibition of masculine behaviors, thereby resisting the conventional notion of an idealized feminine presentation. Her foray into womanhood through an alternative masquerade at a party, wherein she adorns garments and accessories borrowed from her two mature sisters, characters regarded as "ideal women," elicits feelings of shame. In this feminine performance, Mick perceives herself as significantly distant from her authentic self, a persona that seems not "like herself at all" (McCullers, 1993, p. 91).

While Gleeson-White's (2001, 2003) interpretation perceives Mick's adolescent body as residing in the gender-fluid state, akin to a "half-man half-woman" configuration, a portrayal that aligns this characterization with the notion of transvestitism symbolizing freedom, this perspective overlooks the fact that Mick's starkly polarized stance and her unwavering adherence to masculine performance act as constraints on her gender fluidity. Her aspiration to embody an unchanging male identity and eliminate any manifestation of womanhood ultimately results in the reinforcement of gender binarism. Luce Irigaray posits that the phallogentric law exerts dominance by reducing all other identities to a homogeneous "Same." This exercise in all-encompassing uniformity obliterates the distinctions between genders (Irigaray, 1985, p. 74). Instead of embracing fluidity or occupying a state described as "half-man half-woman," Mick mistakenly embarks on a mission to liberate herself from her female identity by constructing a "masculine subject," as denominated by Irigaray.

Mick's trajectory of rebellion would face disagreements from feminist and gender theories. While the significance of subjectivity is emphasized by certain feminists, like Monique Wittig, it is essential to discern its distinction from a "masculine subject". Wittig (1981) contends that the primary task of feminists should be to demonstrate that "woman" and "man" are both political categories constructed upon the master/slave paradigm, rather than engaging in the translation of a woman into a man. Irigaray also expounds that toppling the phallogentric order with the aim of substitution amounts to "the same thing in the end", and engaging in the discourse of a "masculine subject" leads to the same univocal state of "sexual indifference" within the Phallogentric language (Irigaray, 1985, pp. 68, 76). Consequently, Mick's pursuit of resisting gender binarism through masculine performance falls short of achieving the intended transformative effect.

From a more comprehensive viewpoint, Mick's predicaments with the confines of gender binarism are situated within a broader hierarchical structure characterized by a myriad of binary oppositions that extends beyond the scope of gender. Notably, the mind-body dualism is a salient exemplar. Within this framework, the mind is associated with the sublime, while the body is relegated to a fallen state, serving as a premonitional metaphor for the feminine (Butler, 1999, p. 164).

As an ambitious female artist, Mick confronts the stark reality that the artistic domain is predominantly male-dominated, with expectations of artists embodying masculine traits (Perry, 1986, pp. 36, 44). McCullers initially delves into Mick's theme in her earlier work, *Wunderkind*, which had already explored the obstacles faced by an adolescent girl aspiring to enter the artistic sphere. In the case of Mick, she is also aware that her female body poses a hindrance to her aspirations. In an empty room, she inscribes the names of male celebrities, most notably "MOZART", in large block letters on one wall, while on the opposite wall, she writes the word "PUSSY" beneath her initials, "M.K." Her perception that the term for the female sexual organ is "very bad", along with the spatial juxtaposition of these two contrasting walls of words, underscores Mick's recognition of her female body's subordinate status and its function as a barrier to her aspirations.

Subsequently, Mick exhibits a profound desire to disassociate herself from her female corporeal form and reside within the spiritual realm. She delineates a metaphysical "inner room," employing music as a tool to demarcate this inner space from the corporeal "external room." Music serves as a catalyst propelling her towards artistic transcendence within the spiritual domain, where she perceives that "the whole world was this symphony, and there was not enough of her to listen" (McCullers, 1993, p. 101). This ideal realm, characterized by perfect order and unblemished purity, has been construed as offering Mick the potential for a pathway leading to

emancipation from the constraints imposed by gender norms (González-Groba, 1994, p. 91). The embodiment of this realm finds expression in a distant, snow-covered locale, where Mick envisions accompanying Mr. Singer, the sole individual granted entry into her "inner room." This envisioned journey symbolizes her departure from the Southern town, effectively forsaking the conventional trappings of womanhood. However, upon her return to corporeal existence, the actuality of her female body transforms what was previously described as "sublime music" into "the most excruciating agony." Following the conclusion of the symphony, Mick resorts to self-inflicted violence employing her fists and rocks. This act of masochism serves as an outlet for the frustration stemming from her regression to corporeal existence, signifying her endeavors to create distance from, deconstruct, and ultimately disavow her female body.

Although the musical realm within Mick's cognitive domain liberates her expression, previously stifled by male interpretation (Martin, 2009, p. 9), and facilitates the construction of a distinct individual identity (González-Groba, 1994, p. 92), the deeply ingrained dichotomy of mind and body ensnares Mick once more within the confines of Phallocentrism. According to Mary Russo, the term "grotesque" evokes a conventional Phallogentric metaphor rooted in cave symbolism, symbolizing the female body, thereby embodying historical and cultural connections between the female and the corporeal aspects, notably bodily detritus such as blood, tears and vomit. Moreover, it sustains derogatory associations, including the earthly, the dark and the low (Russo, 1995, pp. 1-3). Consequently, in her struggle against her own female corporeality, Mick implicitly reinforces the Phallogentric framework.

It is also essential to note that masochism may implicitly connote misogyny by marking the female body as "grotesque". While the female identity is inherently constructed in opposition to the male norm as "grotesque", and the bodily metaphor of the "grotesque cave" invokes misogynistic connotations (Russo, 1995, pp. 1-2, 12), Mick's engagement in masochistic practices reinforces this naturalized association. Her body, marked by bleeding, is relegated to the periphery and is regarded with a sense of terror and repulsion (Russo, 1995, p. 3), positioned significantly distant from the pristine portrayal of the idealized female form.

The concept of the "aerial sublime," as articulated by Mary Russo, serves as a symbolic representation of Mick's mind-body dualism, highlighting its inherent limitations. Historically, the image of a flying woman has carried metaphorical significance within discourses related to women's emancipation, symbolizing "the fantasy of a femininity which defies the limits of the body, especially the female body" (Russo, 1995, p. 44). Mick's "inner room" can be likened to the metaphorical "sky," and her aspirations for transcendence align with notion of engaging in an imaginary flight. Throughout the narrative, McCullers recurrently references Mick's yearning for flight as emblematic of her desire for liberation. Positioned upright at the peak of the roof, "she spread out her arms like wings", and "there was something about getting to the very top that gave you a wild feeling and made you want to yell or sing or raise up your arms and fly" (McCullers, 1993, p. 29). Mick's aspirations extend to the invention of a flying apparatus, and she even attempts to construct a glider in her backyard. Unfortunately, due to a shortage of materials, she is unable to achieve flight with her contraption, emblematic of the failure of her endeavors towards liberation.

In reality, the concept of the "aerial sublime" functions as a symbolic allegory for a form of emancipation that is inherently susceptible to failure, mirroring Mick's eventual reversion to conventional femininity. One fundamental reason for this susceptibility lies in the inevitable falling associated with flight. Mick observes that

"if you lost grip and rolled off the edge it would kill you" (McCullers, 1993, p. 30). Despite her readiness to take risks by venturing beyond the prescribed boundaries of the female body and challenging the expectations of gender performance, the metaphorical struggle embodied in the act of "flight" inexorably leads to a return to earthly constraints, as "coming down was the hardest part of any climbing" (McCullers, 1993, p. 30). This inescapable descent is poignantly symbolized in Mick's artistic creations, particularly her paintings titled "Sea Gull with Back Broken in Storm" and "an airplane crashing down and people jumping out to save themselves" (McCullers, 1993, p. 42), both of which depict the ultimate failure of flight.

Another primary reason for this failure is deeply rooted in a more profound underlying issue, as the concept of "aerial sublime" itself represents the mistaken path toward women's emancipation. It envisions the "sky" as a transcendent realm, drawing upon the Kantian notion of the sublime (Russo, 1995, p. 11). However, this conceptualization carries certain assumptions related to mind-body dualism and is intrinsically linked to gender binarism. Furthermore, the fantasy of escaping the female body through flight ultimately proves to be unattainable. The "sky," like any other space, is pervaded by Phallocentrism. Russo (1995) highlights that women who engage in flying become performers in spectacles rather than attaining subjectivity, as their bodies are subjected to scrutiny, abjection, and the anticipation of a fall. This satirical allegory symbolizes the inevitable futility of Mick's mind-body dualism acting as a fantastical "flight" away from binary gender norms.

Furthermore, the binary oppositions within the hierarchical framework also involves the dichotomous "self"/"other" construct. Mick assumes an adversarial stance towards her immediate environment, including her familial relationships, and she strives to delineate a clear demarcation between her individual "self" and the realm of the "other". Her paintings signify this dichotomy, as evidenced by her portrayal of scenes such as "all the people trying to push and crowd into one little lifeboat," and "the best one," which depicts "the whole town fighting on Broad Street" (McCullers, 1993, p. 37). These depictions function as indicators of the deeply rooted antagonism prevailing in the town, even in the absence of apparent causes. Adhering to this framework as an ingrained societal convention, Mick finds herself unable to conjure the "real name" for the artwork, although "in the back of her mind somewhere she knew what it was" (McCullers, 1993, p. 37). This overarching opposition between the "self" and the "other" is also manifested in Mick's recurring nightmares, wherein she either topples a large gathering or is trampled by the collective "Other."

Given that Mick's struggles regarding gender binarism are intricately interwoven with the fabric of hierarchical structures, she remains largely unaware of the interplay between Phallocentrism and these other oppositional constructs. The uncritical acceptance of Phallocentric paradigms becomes evident in Mick's attitude toward Mr. Singer. Upon initial scrutiny, Mick holds Mr. Singer in high esteem. Waggoner (2017/2018) interprets Singer as an active feminist listener, advocating for reciprocal communication. Nonetheless, the dynamic between Mick and Singer falls short of being equitable or truly reciprocal. While Singer's silence could be construed as a metaphorical representation of femininity, Mick perceives this mute character as a passive entity akin to a "silent God," thus mirroring the femininity constructed within masculine parameters. Mick's admiration does not genuinely extend to the real person but rather to a compliant figure facilitating the enactment of metaphorical "man's fantasies" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 25). She envisions an idealized, reticent man who would comprehend her and engage in conversation as per her desires. However, Singer's perspective, as conveyed through the narrative, reveals a more nuanced reality marked by emotions such as fear and anxiety, rendering him

incapable of genuine understanding and even experiencing him discomfort and disturbance. In a manner akin to many other residents of the town, Mick shapes the mute character into a silent object molded by the subject's requisites. The portrayal of Singer epitomizes Mick's "female fantasy," positioning herself as the "masculine subject" in safeguarding her self-identification.

In summary, despite presenting herself as a tomboy figure with manifestations of gender fluidity, Mick remains entangled in intricate predicaments. These predicaments stem from the pervasive influence of ingrained Phallocentrism and the overarching framework of hierarchical and oppositional structures, which obstruct her attempts to challenge the established gender binarism. This complexity becomes apparent through her peculiar sensation of feeling "cheated" following her near-conformity to the idealized female image. These concealed entanglements defy straightforward articulation, as exemplified by her observation that "there was nothing to be mad at" (McCullers, 1993, p. 301).

Biff Brannon's Emancipation from Gender Binarism

Biff Brannon, the proprietor of a local town cafe, shares similarities with Mick in his embodiment of the "gender grotesque" concept, which challenges the prevailing gender conventions. However, throughout the narrative, Biff embarks on a gradual process of emancipating himself from the predicaments engendered by gender binarism, thereby venturing onto a more advanced trajectory. This process aims to facilitate a harmonious coexistence of gender differences across various interconnected dimensions.

The initial facet of Biff's emancipation pertains to the physical aspect. Biff demonstrates an innate potential for a non-binary gender identity, which is discernible in his wearing of a woman's wedding ring and his meticulous commitment to bodily cleanliness, a practice frequently associated with the feminine archetype. During the hot season, he diligently cleans his body twice daily. Nevertheless, during the early stages, Biff persists in concealing the feminine attributes on his body, influenced by the pervasive norms rooted in gender binarism. He accentuates his physical masculinity, characterized by bluish cheeks and a jaw adorned with a beard described as "black and heavy as though it had grown for three days," which is "half-concealed by the cynical droop of his eyelids" (McCullers, 1993, p. 11). Furthermore, he exhibits a dark, wiry-haired chest and calloused hands, aligning himself with stereotypical masculinity. Although his physical embodiment encompasses elements of gender diversity, at this juncture, these features are marked by tension rather than harmonious cohabitation.

Nonetheless, Biff's initial internal struggle concerning his corporeal state serves as a precursor to a transformation that fundamentally prompts him to reevaluate the prevailing paradigm of gender binarism. This significant shift is instigated by a distressing incident on his twenty-ninth birthday, during which he becomes the object of spectacle, subjected to ridicule and humiliation. This particular episode exposes him to a profound sense of shame associated with bodily degradation, a dimension of human experience conventionally ascribed to the female gender rather than the male. Subsequent to this moment, Biff undergoes a substantial physical transformation, culminating in the loss of his primary sexual function, a pivotal marker of traditional masculinity. This transformative event results in the emergence of a biologically androgynous body, plunging him into a state of suffering, marked by a feeling that "everything was gone" (McCullers, 1993, p. 202). Concurrently, it also grants him access to the transgender perspective, endowing him with an empathetic understanding of the

challenges faced by individuals whose bodies are categorized as “freaks,” as manifested in his statement, “I like freaks,” coupled with his wife’s remark about him, stating, “you’re one yourself” (McCullers, 1993, p. 11).

This newfound insight, coupled with Biff’s inherent inclination to “store up a whole lot of details and then come upon something real” (McCullers, 1993, p. 12), facilitates his departure from the conventional masculine subject position. Consequently, rather than seeking to deconstruct or disavow his androgynous body, which relegates individual to a subordinate status within the binary gender framework, paralleling Mick’s predicament, Biff meticulously scrutinizes not only his own body but also the bodies of other gender “grotesques.” He discerns that “in nearly every person there was some special physical part kept away guarded” (McCullers, 1993, p. 23). In the case of Mick, this delicate part refers to her newly developing tender nipples, emblematic of her anxiety regarding the burgeoning aspects of femininity in her adolescent body. As for Biff himself, this pertains to his nonfunctional genitalia. This heightened comprehension of diverse bodies and their susceptibility within a binary gender paradigm cultivates a readiness to transcend the paradigm. His subsequent contemplations, asserting that “by nature all people are of both sexes” (McCullers, 1993, p. 112) signify a palpable shift towards embracing the coexistence of physical gender differences.

Another illustrative instance of Biff’s evolution manifests in his multifaceted parental role, encompassing both paternal and maternal dimensions. Biff exhibits caring affection for the children around him, assuming dual roles as a fatherly figure and a maternal figure. This nuanced approach to care-giving prompts his friend Lucile to suggest that he would be a good mother. Particularly, Biff has deep feelings of tenderness and nurturance towards Mick, encompassing an aspect of maternal love: “the part of him that sometimes almost wished he was a mother and that Mick and Baby were his kids” (McCullers, 1993, p. 112).

However, in the initial stage, the maternal facet of his affection engenders a sense of disquiet within him. This disquiet, stemming from the constraints imposed by entrenched gender binarism, proves challenging to articulate adequately through language, as he grapples with a sense of something being awry, as if “there was something about it that was—not quite right. Yes. Wrong” (McCullers, 1993, p. 198). Biff’s complex emotions surrounding his love for Mick takes on a distorted quality, leading him to avoid engaging in meaningful conversations with her or even adopting a harsh and unfamiliar tone. These behaviors lead to Mick’s misinterpretation of his emotions as antipathy.

Nevertheless, Biff successfully navigates his intricate emotions stemming from his unconventional love with heightened self-awareness. He embarks on a process of introspection, pondering, “he had done nothing wrong but in him he felt a strange guilt. Why?” This sense of guilt is recognized as “the dark guilt in all men, unreckoned and without a name” (McCullers, 1993, p. 199). Biff arrives at a profound understanding of the deeply ingrained Phallocentric norms that have constrained expressions of maternity within men.

Through a tumultuous internal struggle, he attains a state of equilibrium in which both paternal and maternal roles coexist harmoniously within himself. This transformative journey involves acknowledging that a part of him yearns to assume a maternal role, albeit without entirely overshadowing his paternal identity. Instead, he envisions a harmonious integration of these roles, expressing a desire “To adopt a couple of little children. A boy and a girl. About three or four years old so they would always feel like he was their own father. Their Dad. Our Father” (McCullers, 1993, p. 202). As the narrative concludes, it becomes evident from Mick’s perspective that

Biff "didn't have this grudge against her any more," and he actively seeks opportunities for conversation with her. This transformation signifies the resolution of the contradictions inherent in his parental love.

The final dimension of Biff's emancipation is manifested in the realm of gender relations, particularly within his marriage to Alice. Initially, their relationship is marked by a sense of unease arising from their pronounced disparities. Alice, assuming the role of a pragmatic wife, exhibits a strong concern for material matters, while Biff, in his capacity as a contemplative individual, derives satisfaction from intellectual pursuits. Biff accentuates the inherent incongruity of their distinctions, leading to an impasse in their relationship where Phallogocentric norms come to the forefront. He delineates Alice as a prototypical embodiment of femininity, employing descriptors such as tough, small, and common. He also perceives her as lack in curiosity, which he regards as "a real kindness" (McCullers, 1993, p. 11), a trait he deems scarce among women. Even when he gazes upon her body, he primarily regards her through the lens of physicality, reducing her to a "complete, unbroken figure" (McCullers, 1993, p. 12), devoid of nuanced details. Following Alice's passing, his initial recollection of her visage is one of blankness, retaining merely a distinct image of her fleshy feet, laden with sexual connotations, aligning with the view that "the Japanese believe that (this is) the choicest part of a woman" (McCullers, 1993, p. 110). Biff's association of Alice with a stereotypical female image instills in him the sense that "being around that woman always made him different from his real self" (McCullers, 1993, p. 11).

However, subsequent to Alice's demise, Biff undergoes a transformative shift away from gender binarism. Liberated from the confines of his role as a "husband" within the familial structure, Biff's intellectual faculties are reignited. "A picture that had long been stored inside him" emerges in his consciousness" (McCullers, 1993, p. 103). Commencing with a reflection on details of Alice's body, Biff embarks on a comprehensive reevaluation of their relationship. This process entails an acknowledgment of his history of physical aggression and disparagement directed toward his wife. Introspection functions as "a dragnet for lost feelings" (McCullers, 1993, p. 113), facilitating the revitalization of his waning affection and harmonizing the gender dynamics within their relationship.

The bedroom shared by Biff and Alice can be interpreted as a metaphorical representation of the dynamics of their relationship. During the period when Biff was still ensnared within the confines of gender binarism, which led to marital discord arising from gender differences, the room remained consistently disorderly. Subsequently, Biff takes proactive measures to restore order and harmony to the room. This reconfiguration of the bedroom results in its conversion into a space described as "both luxurious and sedate" (McCullers, 1993, p. 191), symbolizing the reconciliation of contradictions into a state of equilibrium. Importantly, the renewed room no longer adheres to a distinctively masculine or feminine aesthetic but instead embodies a harmonious coexistence of both. It includes the presence of a sewing machine and curtains meticulously crafted by Biff himself, transcending conventional masculine stereotypes.

In this rearranged space, a significant event transpires concerning Alice's remains, specifically her perfume and lemon rinse, symbolic representations of femininity. Biff initiates the application of perfume to his dark, hirsute armpits, a region marked by distinctly masculine traits, and employs the lemon rinse on his hair. This regimen results in a noticeable improvement in the condition of his hair, mirroring a shift towards a healthier equilibrium between masculinity and femininity within his transgendered body. In stark contrast to Mick's desire

for homogeneity within gender binarism, Biff preserves his masculine attributes. He maintains dual gender performances and attains a state of being a comprehensive and harmoniously diversified “real self.”

According to Gleeson-White's analysis, when Biff interacts with Alice's cosmetics while facing the mirror, he undergoes a sensation of embodying a unified, feminine “true” self in a state of Oneness (Gleeson-White, 2003, p. 80). However, it is imperative to emphasize that Biff's transformative revelation does not stem from a recognition of a uniform feminine self but rather from an epiphanic moment. During this epiphany, Biff initiates a contemplation of the binary oppositions that not only characterize gender, but also various other polarities. While gazing at himself in the mirror—a symbolic stage for his customary introspection—Biff experiences a profound moment in which “he exchanged a deadly secret glance with himself in the mirror and stood motionless”: “The boundary of death. He felt in him each minute that he had lived with her. And now their life together was whole as only the past can be whole” (McCullers, 1993, p. 192). This realization signifies the harmonization of disparities not only between male and female, husband and wife, but also between the present and the past, as well as the fundamental dichotomy of life and death. Biff thus traverses “the boundary of death,” attaining a state of being as the whole real self, characterized by the integration of a life that was once fragmented and marred by opposition.

As a result, Biff rearranges his memories with the intent of further introspection, recognizing that “memories built themselves with almost architectural order” (McCullers, 1993, p. 192). The scent of perfume on his body, symbolizing the coexistence of dual gender performances, triggers the recollection of a traumatic childhood memory linked to the loss of his scraps, emblematic of his feminine dimension. Furthermore, the lemon rinse applied to his hair brings about the realization that “certain whims that he had ridiculed in Alice were now his own” (McCullers, 1993, p. 193). The transformation emanates from the newfound equilibrium in gender differences manifesting within his androgynous body, extending to the harmonization of discrepant notions within their psyches. This development propels Biff beyond the constraints of Phallocentrism, which had previously led to his disparagement of both Alice and women in general, liberating them from the constricting stereotype of irrationality. Following this revelatory moment, Biff attains a heightened awareness of the Phallocentric law, propelling him towards a more advanced stage of embracing the multifaceted nature of gender differences.

Despite his public image as a man, Biff's achieved state of harmonious gender coexistence aligns with Luce Irigaray's concept of the female gender as “the sex which is not one.” In Irigaray's framework, womanhood is characterized as “neither one nor two,” and consequently, “speaking as woman” represents a form of resistance against the dominant Phallocentric language (Irigaray, 1985, p. 26). Remarkably, Biff attains a similar state of being. He upholds gender difference as a state of duality or multiplicity, persistently remaining “several” and resisting reduction to a singular “Same.” This stance transcends the pursuit of synthesis within a hierarchical structure that posits a central authority and peripheral entities, signifying an emancipation from the traditional and restrictive gender binarism.

The Author's Exploration of Gender Binarism

From a certain perspective, Mick Kelly can be interpreted as assuming the protagonist's role in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, given that this character, alongside another tomboyish adolescent named Frankie Addams from

The Member of the Wedding, is widely recognized as an autobiographical creation within Carson McCullers' literary works. Nevertheless, this novel, analogous to a polyphonic musical composition, incorporates various narrative voices that intersect horizontally, providing voice to different characters, all of which collectively resonate with recurrent themes (Smith, 1979, pp. 259, 263; Fuller, 1987-1988, p. 55). As a result, this narrative can be more precisely understood as featuring multiple protagonists, with both Mick and Biff emerging as central figures, each contributing a distinct perspective of the author's exploration of gender binarism.

Mick's character appears to be inspired by McCullers' introspection into her own personal history. The phonetic similarity between "McCullers" and "Mick Kelly" underscores the potential autobiographical connection. In the role of an autobiographical character, Mick embodies McCullers' personal journey as a female growing up in the American Deep South. McCullers herself was a remarkably gifted artist who came of age in Columbus, Georgia. Her biography reveals that she was born with the expectation of achieving artistic greatness, a sentiment she shared with Mick (Carr, 1975, p. 3). Initially, her aspirations revolved around pursuing a career in piano, mirroring Mick's musical aptitude and ambitions. However, this early ambition encountered an obstacle in the form of her unrequited affection for her piano teacher, Mary Tucker, who was a married woman. McCullers held a "demonstrable love" for Tucker, yet she "could never articulate such feelings to her teacher" (Carr, 1975, pp. 26-27). Her passion remained unreciprocated, ultimately leading to the abandonment of her piano career. Drawing on Butler's assertion that gender constitutes a metaphysical unity reliant upon stable and institutional heterosexuality, which both requires and produces the univocity of gender terms, thereby generating the limitation within a binary gender system (Butler, 1999, p. 30), McCullers' own experiences of grappling with a love deemed "inappropriate" within the naturalized Phallogocentric framework, where masculine and feminine terms are rigidly demarcated, significantly influenced her artistic aspirations. These experiences are transmuted into the narrative of Mick in her debut novel, wherein Mick's heterosexual initiation is also a catalyst for relinquishing her artistic dreams.

As a consequence of McCullers' familiarity with the deprivation of passionate love and her own experiences of artistic failure, she composed narratives that feature a protagonist who is even more disadvantaged than herself (Perry, 1986, p. 37), exploring the predicaments encountered by aspiring female artists within the context of gender binarism. In an earlier work, *Wunderkind* (1936), a precursor to the character Mick, another adolescent female prodigy named Frances confronts a similar expulsion from the realm of music upon recognizing her subservience to a young male violinist and the domineering masculinity embodied by her male piano teacher (Perry, 1986, p. 39). In conclusion, Mick serves as a representation of the author's past emotional attachments and firsthand encounters with the challenges posed by gender binarism. During the composition of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers appears to have reflected on her own failures and, in doing so, demonstrated a deep introspection on her unsuccessful resistance against these issues.

In light of this introspection, Biff's perspective potentially encapsulates the author's progression from her past setbacks towards a forward-looking outlook achieved through a more objective examination of gender binarism. Biff fulfills a unique narrative function within the narrative. In *Author's Outline of "The Mute"*, the outline of this novel, McCullers describes the relationships between the multiple protagonists in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* as resembling "the spokes of a wheel—with Singer representing the center point" (McCullers, 1972, p. 143). This wheel imagery metaphorically illustrates the interplay between the periphery and the core in a

hierarchical structure. However, Biff distinguishes himself from the other three “spokes” who share a fervent reverence for the “center point”, Singer. Instead, Biff assumes the role of an observer and contemplative thinker, providing a perspective from the sidelines and offering observations and commentary on the other central characters that complement their respective narrative contributions.

Distinguished by his acute inquisitiveness into concealed realities as well as an open mind, Biff undertakes his unique narrative role in representing the author’s seeking of the underlying truths beneath societal norms. The persistent query of “WHY?” courses through Biff’s thoughts, as it “flowed through blood in his veins. He thought of people and of objects and of ideas and the question was in him” (McCullers, 1993, p. 191). This interrogative term, along with the recurrent usage of interrogative sentences and their rhythmic repetition, functions as an emblem of Biff’s contemplative unrest. It appears as though he grapples with an insistent and disquieting quest for illumination, a solitary journey encapsulated by the phrase “Mister Brannon—by himself.” (McCullers, 1993, p. 27).

Furthermore, in contrast to other protagonists such as Mick, who embodies the author’s past experiences, Singer, who remains reticent, and Blount and Cooperland, who steadfastly adhere to their convictions, Biff adopts an open-minded stance and employs dialectical thinking. Gambony-Steding posits that Biff exhibits the traits of a reflective figure with a propensity for dialectical reasoning, consistently subjecting his own conclusions to scrutiny and advocating for self-interrogation (Gambony-Steding, 2021, p. 168). Indeed, Biff becomes the vessel through which McCullers articulates her own exploration of how to transcend the constraints of the gender binarism through self-examination.

Biff’s quest for truth reaches its apex in another epiphanic occurrence in the final segment of the novel, surpassing the one previously examined, and encapsulating a paramount moment in the narrative. This particular instance provides McCullers with the means to articulate her ultimate contemplation of the core of gender binarism. During this event, Biff purposefully disengages from external stimuli, embracing the profound and uninterrupted solitude he had previously avoided. This retreat from distractions entails the cessation of radio transmissions, temporary abandonment of crossword puzzles, and abstention from making phone calls. Gambony-Steding suggests that it is precisely this solitude, while undoubtedly challenging, that renders Biff’s process of reflection feasible (Gambony-Steding, 2021, p. 168).

In the silence, Biff delves into deep introspection, wrestling with what he identifies as “The riddle. The question that had taken root in him and would not let him rest. The puzzle of Singer and the rest of them” (McCullers, 1993, p. 305). This enigma revolves around the hierarchical structure manifested in the relationships among other protagonists, akin to the metaphorical “spokes of a wheel.” Within this hierarchical system, Biff’s specific focus lies on Mick’s unsuccessful endeavor to resist the constraints imposed upon her femininity, resulting in her gradual transformation into “something ladylike and delicate” (McCullers, 1993, p. 305). His discernment leads him to recognize the naturalized state of gender binarism governing these dynamics, concluding that “there was something not natural about it all—something like an ugly joke. When he thought of it he felt uneasy and in some unknown way afraid” (McCullers, 1993, p. 307).

This awakening from entrenched Phallocentrism, despite its disconcerting nature, proves to be profoundly enlightening, expanding the contemplative scope into a broader structural and even historical context. Biff “felt a quickening in him,” and “sweat glistened on his temples and his face was contorted” (McCullers, 1993, p. 307).

This heightened state of cognition leads him to discern “a warning, a shaft of terror” from the suspension “between the two worlds”, namely the world of the past and the world of the future (McCullers, 1993, p. 307). Among Biff’s two eyes, his left eye is “narrowly delved into the past”. This “past world” symbolizes the enduring hierarchical structure, as metaphorically likened to a wheel in the novel’s outline. McCullers has also offered another metaphor of this past world through a dream of Singer, the “center point” on the “wheel”, revered in this symbolic dream by other protagonists and “uncounted crowds of kneeling people in the darkness” (McCullers, 1993, p. 185). This structure finds a parallel in a biblical passage read by Alice, which declares, proclaiming, “All men seek for Thee.” Antonapoulos, a Greek character who holds a mysterious, elevated object above Singer, symbolizes the Western cultural origin of binarism. Collectively, these elements constitute the past world, within which gender binarism, an integral component of this hierarchical system, also possesses a historical lineage.

Simultaneously, Biff’s “right eye” is oriented toward the “future world”, representing the other side of the author’s exploration. His “right eye” has “a glimpse of human struggle and of valor... And of those who labor and of those who—one word—love” (McCullers, 1993, p. 307). This tableau signifies humanity’s unwavering battle against the hierarchical system, including gender binarism, exemplified by the transgressive love embodied by McCullers herself and her characters. Nevertheless, the future world is also portrayed as a perilous terrain marked by “blackness, error, and ruin”. There exists a “bitter irony” intertwined with “faith”, and “darkness” coexists with “radiance”. From Biff’s perspective, McCullers suggests that the resistance carries an inherent risk of entanglement within the boundaries of naturalized gender binarism, thereby perpetuating the very challenges it seeks to surmount. Consequently, Biff finds himself suspended between past conventions and future perils, grappling with doubt about his own sensibilities, arising from a painful acknowledgement of this patent paradox. However, he ultimately regains his composure, accepts this truth, and resolutely confronts the future. In his own words, “And when at last he was inside again he composed himself soberly to await the morning sun.” (McCullers, 1993, p. 307). Through the character of Biff, McCullers embarks on a comprehensive examination of gender binarism, conveying her optimistic outlook for the future in this manner.

This prospective orientation appears to parallel an Eastern perspective, as Biff’s achieved state of harmonious coexistence between gender differences is akin to the traditional Chinese philosophical concept of “he” (和). “He” is a significant notion present in both Confucianism and Taoism, two prominent branches of traditional Chinese culture. It denotes the harmonious relationship between two or more distinct entities. Instead of advocating for synthesis or reducing disparities into a singular, undifferentiated entity, the core principle of “he” emphasizes the necessity of preserving these differences while allowing them to exist simultaneously and harmoniously. This aligns with the maxim found in “The Analects of Confucius” that promotes “harmony in diversity” (和而不同). When addressing the theme of gender, the concept of “harmony in diversity” underscores the synchronous and harmonious coexistence of gender differences. This notion aligns with Biff’s final attitude to gender, a state of equilibrium that not only recognizes but also preserves gender distinctions within various dimensions such as body, parental roles and marriage, surpassing mere oscillation between polarized gender extremes.

This ideal state diverges from gender fluidity, characterized by perpetual fluctuation between two gender terms and a focus on diachronic transformation within the post-structuralist perspective. While the latter viewpoint is undeniably valid and illuminating, the promotion of fluidity may prove insufficient to emancipate

individuals from the deeply entrenched constraints of the hierarchical system that persists from the “past world,” as exemplified by Mick’s mistaken paths. Indeed, these two approaches should be considered mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory, as the concept of “harmony in diversity” does neither advocate for a regression to pre-modernist static synchronicity nor endorse an overly simplistic synthesis of different gender identities. It rather encompasses an ongoing and dynamic progression—an unique path towards the perpetual dynamism of gender. As elucidated by the Taoist principles in *Tau and Teh*: “The created universe carries the yin at its back and the yang in front; Through the union of these prevailing principles, it attains a state of harmony” (Laotse, 1958, p. 206). In summary, in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, particularly exemplified by Biff Brannon, “harmony in diversity” symbolizes an idealized state of gender dynamism, aspiring to transcend the confines imposed by gender binarism.

The integration of Eastern philosophical thought finds manifestation in the bedroom that is meticulously reconfigured by Biff, symbolizing an increasing compatibility of gender differences. Within this space, there is a noteworthy presence in the form of “little Japanese pagoda with glass pendants that tinkled with strange musical tones in a draught” (McCullers, 1993, p. 192). This Japanese pagoda, positioned adjacent to Alice’s perfume, which acts as the conduit to Biff’s harmonious reconciliation of masculinity and femininity, reemerges in the novel’s culminating scene during Biff’s ultimate epiphany moment. The reappearance of this symbol may allude to its specific role, which is to signify the author’s proposition of a promising pathway towards achieving a successful emancipation from gender binarism.

Conclusion

Initially published in 1940, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* offers a vivid depiction of the struggles encountered by women and individuals with non-binary gender identities within the binary gender paradigm prevalent in the American South. This literary work not only sheds light on the subtle paradox embedded in various attempts to challenge the confines of gender binarism but also presents a potential route towards eventual emancipation from it.

Mick Kelly, the adolescent tomboy, assumes a pivotal role as one of the multiple protagonists within the narrative, representing the intricate predicaments associated with the pursuit of emancipation. Firstly, her struggles emblems that a prevailing influence of Phallocentrism might misguide women’s efforts to endorse gender fluidity, leading them to adopt a polarized stance wherein they perform as a “masculine subject.” Paradoxically, this perpetuates the phallocratic order and maintains a static gender binarism. Furthermore, the depiction of this character’s failure in resisting gender norms signifies an influence generating from a broader framework with various hierarchical and oppositional paradigms, such as the mind-body dualism and the binary contrast between “self” and “other.” Mick’s setbacks show that these interconnected paradigms also have the potential to obstruct the intended effects of transformative endeavors. Consequently, despite her earnest intentions to challenge gender binarism, there remains a likelihood that these actions paradoxically contribute to the perpetuation of Phallocentrism and binary gender norms.

Conversely, another central character, Biff Brannon, who personifies the attributes of a non-binary gender identity, serves as a literary exemplar of a successful emancipation from the constraints of gender binarism. Notwithstanding initial missteps, he embarks on a gradual process of fostering a harmonious coexistence of

gender differences across an array of interconnected dimensions. These dimensions encompass understanding and embracing an androgynous body, assuming a multifaceted parental role, and reconciling gender disparities within the context of matrimony. The achievement of a state of equilibrium that not only acknowledges but also preserves gender differences transcends the influence of neutralized Phallocentrism and the overarching hierarchical milieu.

Through the portrayal of these two distinct protagonists, McCullers employs dual perspectives to conduct an in-depth exploration of gender binarism. While Mick serves as a reflection of her introspection into her own personal history, Biff encapsulates the author's evolution from the past setbacks towards a forward-looking perspective attained through a more objective inquiry. This inquiry involves a contemplation of the nature of gender binarism within its structural and historical context. Ultimately, McCullers conveys her stance that the state of harmonious coexistence of gender differences, as exemplified by the character of Biff Brannon, represents a promising departure from the confines of traditional gender binarism. Drawing on an Eastern perspective, this ideal state aligns with the traditional Chinese philosophical concept of "harmony in diversity."

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