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Mick Kelly: Dressing The Part

Throughout Carson McCullers's novel The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Mick Kelly struggles to create and maintain a sense of identity which is true to herself and yet acceptable to others. Due to socially prescribed gender roles, Mick is unable to achieve her true potential; rather, she is forced to accept defeat so that she can be welcomed into and embraced by the society that rejects her individuality. My intent is to chronicle how, through the course of the novel, Mick sacrifices herself to win the love of others. Feminist critics Ann Carlton and Louise Westling provide the theoretical framework within which I am working.

Part One, Chapter Two: Introducing Mick

The reader first glimpses the character of Mick Kelly through the eyes of a middle-aged man, Biff Brannon:

A gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve, stood looking in the doorway. She was dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoe --so at first glance she was like a very young boy. ... Several years ago she had always tagged behind her older brother. ...Later she would come in pulling a couple of snotty babies in a wagon. But if she wasn't nursing or trying to keep up with the bigger ones, she was by herself. Now the kid stood there seeming not to be able to make up her mind what she wanted. (14)

This introduction to Mick is furnished by an adult male who views Mick as someone who not only does not fit the image of a young girl, but also rebels against such norms. "We see her drawn between the role of child-adolescent-awkward, sexually ambiguous, fearful--and the role of the nurturing caretaker mother-child, acting out the prescribed cultural role for the muted group, taking

care of the younger children” (Carlton 55). However, “It is her differences that are pointed out; she does not fit the culture’s idea of a female child blossoming into womanhood; in spite of the fact that she is taking care of the children, she lacks the appearance, a strong cultural demand of the female” (55). Mick is someone generating “double-takes” by both those who know her and those who are unfamiliar with her. Just hitting puberty, she is gangly and awkward, too tall for a young girl by society’s standards, though at this age girls often grow taller, albeit temporarily, than young boys. That she is never seen with children her own age is significant--she has reached the age of twelve without social pressure to conform to the expectations of her peers. She aspires instead to emulate her older brother, Bill, and model his masculine ways. Later she “nurses” her younger siblings, simultaneously forced to take a maternal role with her younger brothers while emulating the role of her big brother.

Biff’s version of Mick mimics what she perceives as masculine behavior; she overacts the role. Mick dresses in typically masculine attire, speaks with a hoarse, boyish voice, and hitches up her shorts and “swaggers like a cowboy in the picture show” (17). Mick over-reaches because she is working hard to overcome the feminine role. The masculine role, while neither biologically nor psychologically befitting her, serves as a mode of rebellion against the socially prescribed standard of femininity. At an early age she decided she had to choose her own gender. To be able to follow her true self and achieve her artistic and inventive dreams, Mick realized she’d have to be a boy.

Biff is aware of Mick’s rejection of the feminine role. He notes in her the “special physical part kept always guarded... The kid Mick picked at the front of her blouse to keep the cloth from rubbing the new, tender nipples beginning to come out on her breast” (23-24). While the prepubescent Mick dresses and acts the part of a boy, she cannot indefinitely rebel against her biological clock. At puberty, her body is beginning to conform to its destiny, making Mick increasingly uncomfortable with the conflict between her given sexual identity as a young woman and her desired gender role as a tomboy.

Part One, Chapter Three: The Tomboy Mother

Mick faces the new day and her routine motherly duties. With younger brothers Ralph and Bubber in tow, she restlessly roams the neighborhood. At the construction site of a new home, Mick leaves the children and seeks a moment's peace atop the roof. Fearlessly, Mick climbs to the highest point on the roof, a place where even most boys were afraid of falling to their deaths. She recalls one older boy who had climbed that high the week before. "Mick is measuring her achievement by that of a person from the dominant group, behavior which was appropriate for him but not for a girl, but Mick's behavior springs from a deep longing to escape from the constrictions of the muted culture, already sensed and resisted" (Carlton 56). Here is a moment of liberation. Mick feels tremendous emotions swell inside her but suppresses the urge to sing. "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 28). This moment is wasted through Mick's indecision--unable to express herself, she begins to slip, then chooses to settle down and quietly contemplate. She switches from active, brave, masculine Mick to passive, silent, feminine Mick. From the outside room (Mick's reality) she turns to the inside room (her fantasy world) and placates herself with daydreams of fame and freedom from gender limitations. In her daydreams, she is the older, androgynous M.K., inventor of flying machines who makes balloon trips to China (29). Later she fantasizes about being a composer and "the images she projects for her future self waver from masculine to feminine, from evening suit to rhinestone-spangled dress, because there is no tradition of female composers upon which she can model her daydreams" (Westling 342).

Motherly duties distract Mick from pursuing her masculine fantasies. There is always a baby crying in Mick's future. "She wanted to think for a long time about two or three certain people, to sing to herself, and to make plans. But that Ralph was still hollering and there wouldn't be any peace for her at all" (30). Mick must leave her peak and return to earth where "she seemed much shorter and smaller..."(30). To combat this feeling of insignificance, she "hitched her shorts

and jerked the belt a notch tighter” (30), then strode away from the crying child and its demand for motherly attention. Inside the new house Mick resorts to creative graffiti to express her thoughts:

Mick drew the big clock letters very slowly. At the top she wrote EDISON, and under that she drew the names of DICK TRACY and MUSSOLINI. Then, in each corner with the largest letters of all, made with green and outlined in red, she wrote her initials--M.K. When that was done she crossed over to the opposite wall and wrote a very bad word--PUSSY, and beneath that she put her initials, too. (31)

After this Mick does not feel satisfied, which is not surprising. She has linked herself with three male heroes. Edison is the inventor she emulates in her daydreams--seeking a future where her creativity can be channeled into world-changing inventions. Dick Tracy, comic strip detective, leads a masculine, adventurous life. She would like to be equally strong, tough, and as independent as him. Mussolini, the fascist leader, has a country at his disposal as well as seemingly unlimited power and fame. Mick envies the lives of these three men and would like to be able to imitate their qualities, and yet she is aware of the limitations of the feminine role--she can only list herself anonymously and androgynously as M.K. On the opposite wall she scrawls and initials “a very bad word--PUSSY” (31). She rebels against what that word connotes by derisively putting it opposite the names of her three heroes. Men can be leaders, inventors, and adventurers, but women can be no more than their genitalia: “Mick’s culture has already given her the message that as a female she serves a sexual purpose, and that her life is limited by her sex” (Carlton 57). Women can only be women--impassive and secondary to men.

Mick’s revulsion with femininity most likely begins with her dislike of her older sisters, Hazel and Etta. In personality, she is as opposite from them as possible while sharing the family name and biological female traits.

Hazel and Etta were O.K. As far as sisters went. But Etta was like she was full of worms. All she thought about was movie stars and getting in the movies. ... She primped all 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. ...But it didn't do any good. Sometimes Etta would hold her face with her hands and cry in the night about it. (McCullers 35-35)

Mick dislikes society's demand for beauty in females, internalized in her sisters. This aspect of the feminine role denies women the ability to become rich and famous by means other than beauty. Etta focuses on this and although she realizes she lacks the natural beauty with which to make her fame, she continues to dream of this goal and work towards it with cosmetics and pointless facial exercises. The end result is ongoing misery when she is faced with the knowledge that she will never amount to anything. Mick rejects Etta for personifying the limited feminine role and the pain that comes from it. Nor is Mick close to or fond of her other sister, Hazel.

Hazel was just plain lazy. She was good looking but thick in the head. ...She got the first and biggest share of everything--the first whack at the new clothes and the biggest part of any special treat. Hazel never had to grab for anything and she was soft. (35)

Mick resents Hazel's passivity and envies her ability to get what she wants. She feels that Hazel has it made without having to work for her share as the other Kelly children must do. Hazel is typically feminine--her natural beauty will allow her to be provided for, and she will never have to work for anything in her life.

The relationship Mick shares with her sisters is antagonistic. She dislikes their femininity and resents their pressures upon her to give up her independent masculinity and emulate their feminine ways. To this end, she prefers to inherit her older brother's hand-me-downs rather than theirs. She will not accept even appearing to wear this emblem of femininity.

Her doomed attempt to build a violin out of spare parts symbolizes Mick's attempt to build a masculine artistic identity and future. The violin represents the working sum of her desire for musical aptitude and fame as a composer. She wants a medium through which to express her

feelings as well as a way to express her creative, unfeminine self. The violin, as a project, allows her to believe she can accomplish the impossible through sheer will alone. Mick wants this so badly that merely wishing for it seems an effective catalyst to make dreams reality. But pressured to “grow up” by her sisters and shrugged off by her older brother, Bill, Mick’s faith wanes and she eventually sees the violin in its reality--a childish attempt to accomplish the impossible. This loss of innocence leaves her feeling angry and hurt.

It seemed to her as she thought back over the last month that she had never really believed in her mind that the violin would work. But in her heart she had kept making herself believe. And even now it was hard not to believe a little. (39)

Mick thinks of her attempt to create a violin, to create a role for herself out of incompatible pieces. “But how could she have been so sure the idea would work? So dumb? Maybe when people longed for a thing that had the longing made them trust in anything that might give it to them” (43). Mick realizes that her masquerade is symptomatic of her need to surpass the restricted gender role society has given her. With a mother who’s too busy to nourish her and two sisters who demand her conformity, Mick longs for understanding and acceptance--hence the series of crushes she develops on boys and girls alike (44). Society has given Mick no template on which to model the expression or satisfaction of her needs. Unable to express her feelings, she masochistically turns them inward, striking herself repeatedly to the mantra “I want - I want- I want” (44).

Part Two, Chapter 1: Dressing the Part

In Part Two of the novel, Mick discovers something about her father that becomes her first true step toward maturity. Her father, until now just a shadowy family member, not a true individual, is seen for what he really is. Mick’s father has fallen from his accepted social role of provider and now is in a state of uncomfortable gender role flux. Previously the wage-earner, a tall strong laborer, he fit the prescribed role of husband and father. He exercised a man’s proper power. Due to an accident at work, he is no longer able to work as he once did. Instead of

working in the outside world, his role has confined him to the home--a place traditionally reserved for women. He has lost his place, position, and power. He is forgotten and ignored, crunched uncomfortably into a role ill-suited to him. "Her Dad was too tall for his workbench, and his big bones seemed joined together in a loose way," Mick observes (84).

Mr. Kelly is lonely and unable to socialize with his family as he would like. Mick's dad is uncomfortable in his attempts to connect with his children. He fumbles with attempts at conversation, telling untruths about his workload (his watch repair business is a weak replacement for his previous job) and reaching out to Mick the only way he knows how--through the providing of money, a scant nickel or dime of his beer allowance. Mick realizes:

It wasn't like she was learning a new fact--she had understood it all along in every way except with her brain. Now she just suddenly knew that she knew about her Dad. He was lonesome and he was an old man. Because none of the kids went to him for anything and because he didn't earn much money he felt like he was cut off from the family. And in his lonesomeness he wanted to be close to one of the kids--and they were all so busy that they didn't know it. He felt like he wasn't much real use to anybody. (85)

Mick's father attempts to communicate with his daughter and in his intoxicated state he reaches tears, but the two are uncomfortable and no meaningful connection is made. What Mick learns is that a man without power is socially impotent, no man at all. All along Mick has been masquerading as a male, believing this alone would give her power. Now she must pause and re-evaluate her goal.

In vocational school, Mick finds herself isolated from her peers. The lines drawn between the genders are stricter at school, and Mick's desire to fit into a "bunch" (88) causes her to choose sides. At her age being a tomboy is considered freakish: "the girl who persists in her boyishness through adolescence becomes odder and odder, as social indulgence changes to disapproval. Dresses must be worn, manners must be learned, behavior must become restrained and graceful.

As a girl the tomboy is charming; as an adult she is grotesque” (Westling 339). Despite Mick’s efforts to emulate masculinity, she is still isolated and, like her father, powerless. In grammar school there was no process of selection for friendship; in vocational school there are unwritten rules, and Mick attempts to gain status and friendship by hosting a prom party. As hostess, she seeks power over her guests and the right to dictate the rules of gender.

The prom party is an awkward invention doomed to failure much like Mick’s violin. Once again, Mick believes in her ability to transcend reality. “This was a real party, and it would be better and different from any party she had ever gone to or heard about before” (McCullers 89). She strategically selects guests--only those who are her peers in vocational school, and boys and girls in even numbers. She creates a fictitious apartment name so that the location “sounded swell on the telephone” (89). The house itself is altered for the party with decorations that the Kelly family probably had to scrimp to afford. Mick removes an item of the family’s history from sight: Old Dirty-face.

He was a major way back in the Civil war and had been killed in battle. Some kid once drew eyeglasses and a beard on his picture, and when the pencil marks were erased it left his face all dirty. That was why she called him Old Dirty-Face. The picture was in the middle of a three-part frame. On both sides were pictures of his sons. They looked about Bubber’s age. They had on uniforms and their faces were surprised. They had been killed in battle also. A long time ago. (89)

Mick wants to hide this picture from the prom guests because, “it looks common” (89). It is a reminder of just how common the Kelly family is -- a poor white southern family with Confederate roots, beaten and powerless. The photos are also a reminder of failure to gain power--something Mick seeks to avoid. This party, for her, is a battle she must win, and yet, like her ancestors, is fated to lose.

So eager Mick is to impress her party guests that she breaks down her boundaries and borrows girl clothes from her adversarial older sisters. A ritual cleansing ensues. Mick carefully

scrubs away the rough and dirty parts of her tomboy body and prepares to be transformed by the clothing into a beautiful young woman. While examining the new Mick Kelly in the mirror, she is confused as to how to evaluate her new identity. As masculine Mick, she's a "sap" in girl's clothing; as feminine Mick, "she looked very beautiful" (91). Two hours before the reality of the prom party, "she felt so different from the old Mick Kelly that she knew this would be better than anything else in all her whole life -- this party" (91).

The prom party is a perfect example of gender roles in action. Not one of the guests is comfortable in their evening dresses, or "new dark fall suits" (91). The individual children arrived dressed as adults and converge into anonymity in the group of guests. "There was so much commotion that Mick couldn't notice any separate person. She stood by the hatrack and stared at the party as a whole" (91). The party guests become one entity, following the social scripts they know and hesitating when they have no familiar roles or accepted leader. The boys mob the refreshment table, and "the girls with their different-colored long dresses stood together and they were like a bright hunk of flowers" (92). At the start of this party the gender--indeed, battle--lines have been drawn.

Mick feels the need to orchestrate the party. It is a prom party so by social script the guests are obligated to fill their prom cards with partners. The pressure to act as individuals, to choose and approach potential prom partners, causes an awkward silence.

It came all of the sudden in a very queer way - this quietness. The boys stood together on one side of the room and the girls were across from them. For some reason every person quit making noise at once. The boys held their cards and looked at the girls and the room was very still. None of the boys started asking for proms like they were supposed to do. The awful quietness got worse and she had not been to enough parties to know what she should do. Then the boys started punching each other and talking. The girls giggled--but even if they didn't look at the boys you could tell they only had on their minds whether they were going to be

popular or not. The awful quietness was gone now, but there was something jittery about the room. (92)

The division between the sexes is evident with boys aligned against girls and Mick Kelly in the middle, attempting to be a girl while orchestrating the party. The boys are not mature enough to cover their awkward indecision; instead they turn to roughhousing, expressing themselves through violent masculine play. The boys, though indecisive, are active, while the girls remain passive and wait for the boys to take the lead. When the boys finally do act, they only play ‘follow the leader,’ as they are too frightened to choose partners individually.

While the prom guests are attempting to act the roles of young men and women, another group of children gathers outside the Kelly home. “They were all dirty and in plain shorts or draggled knickers or old everyday dresses. They were just hanging around in the dark to watch the party. She thought of two feelings when she saw these kids--one was sad and the other was a kind of warning” (94). ‘They’ are uninvited because they represent to Mick the old social group of which she is no longer a part. The prom party is a political move for Mick: she is trying to prove to her vocational school peers that she can be one of them. In the prom party setting, however, she is only proving that she can be as clean, pretty, and uncomfortable as everyone else in fancy clothes with unfamiliar social scripts. She can pretend to be a young woman almost as well as she pretends to be a young boy. The uninvited guests are an uncomfortable reminder to Mick that she is rejecting her true unscrubbed and tattered self in favor of an insincere identity. The young party-crashers had accepted Mick for who she was regardless of her gender role, and yet she had disregarded them because they held no political advantage for her. To have invited them would have ruined her chances at popularity with the “in” crowd.

During the first and only promenade Mick takes, she is uncomfortably aware of her freakish height. “She knew what he [her partner] was thinking. It used to worry her all the time. Five feet six inches tall and a hundred and three pounds, and she was only thirteen. Every kid at the party was a runt beside her, except Harry, who was only a couple of inches shorter. No boy

wanted to prom with a girl so much taller than him but maybe cigarettes would help stunt the rest of her growth” (94). Though Mick is uncomfortable with her height, she covers it by boasting about her latest growth spurt. Harry responds with insensitivity: “Once I saw a lady at the fair who was eight and a half feet tall. But you probably won’t grow that big,” he says, comparing her to a sideshow freak in a clumsy attempt to make her feel better (94).

Returning to the party, Mick finds that she has lost control of the situation. The untamed neighborhood children have crashed the party, where their energy and naturalness are infectious--the true prom guests have lost control of themselves. Mick is initially angered that the false reality of the party has crumbled; yet it does not take much time for her to also be infected by the excitement:

The idea of the party was over entirely now. This was just a regular playing out. But it was the wildest night she had ever seen. The kids had caused it. They were like a catching sickness, and their coming to the party made all the other people forget about High School and being almost grown. It was like just before you take a bath in the afternoon when you might wallow around in the back yard and get plenty dirty just for the good feel of it before getting into the tub. Everybody was a wild kid playing out on Saturday night--and she felt like the very wildest of all. (98)

The party gets out of hand because the guests are uncomfortable with the new roles in which they have been confined. Their awkwardness, frustration, and sexual energy find release in the genuine play that occurs during the chaos. “Freshmen in Vocational all dressed up for a real prom party and acting just like kids. It was half playlike and half not playlike at all” that the boys chased girls with “the long, sharp spears of a Spanish bayonet bush” (98). Mick runs, as the other girls do, from the threatening boys and their phallic spears, but then she becomes a boy herself. “She hollered and pushed and was the first to try any new stunt. She made so much noise and moved around so fast she couldn’t notice what anybody else was doing. Her breath wouldn’t come fast

enough to let her do all the wild things she wanted to do” (98). Unfortunately, Mick does not realize until it is too late that her feminine garb restrains her from her tomboys ways. Jumping into a nearby ditch, she realizes her error too late: “with her tennis shoes she would have landed like a cat - but the high pumps made her slip and her stomach hit this pipe. Her breath was stopped” (98).

Mick finds that she was wrong about her vocational school peers, and she was wrong about the social possibilities of the party. As with the broken ukelele that she failed to transform into a working violin, Mick is hurt by the painful realization that she was mistaken. Her peers are no different from herself - they are children attempting to be young adults. Mick is also disillusioned by the failure of her hopes for popularity. She eschews all that pains her at the moment, both her peers and her attempts at masculinity: “She was too old to wear shorts anymore after this. Not no more after this night. Not no more. ...She cupped her hands before her mouth and took a deep breath. ‘Everybody go home! The door is shut! The party is over!’” (99). If Mick had not tried out her feminine role in public at this point, she would probably have decided to settle back into her tomboy role. Having debuted in public as female, following the same social scripts as her peers, Mick has recreated herself as female, however uncomfortable that may be. It is also at this point that she stops seeking love and acceptance from her peers.

Part Two, Chapter Five: The Inside Room vs The Outside Room

Bubber’s words, “Mick, I come to believe we all gonna drown” (136), foreshadow the tidal wave of events that washes over the main characters in the novel. Unfortunately, Mick is too involved with her inside room to notice.

With her it was like there was two places--the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room. ... The

inside room was a very private place. She could be in the middle of a house full of people and still feel like she was locked up by herself. (138-9)

Mick's active life increasingly takes place in the inside room rather than the outside room. Inside her mind she can escape the limitations placed upon her by her social-economic level and her social destiny as a female. It is here that she can let her inner symphony evolve into something almost real. As Louise Westling writes:

Ambitions are the psychological equivalents for the physical assertiveness of the tomboy, and again cultural emphasis on submissiveness and graceful restraint operates to discourage pursuit of professional, artistic, or political goals. ... The girl who insists on following her ambitions almost inevitably pays the price of shame and guilt as an adult; she must live with a very troubled sense of herself as a woman because she has abandoned the familiar boundaries of her gender. (339-40)

In an attempt to bring her inside room into her outside room, Mick sacrifices her lunch money for piano lessons and gives up nightly studies in order to devote her attention to drafting the symphony.

Part Two, Chapter 9: 'That Thing I Want, I Know Not What'

Mick is attracted to Harry for two reasons: he lets her into his inside room and also accepts her as a masculine peer. Together they plot to assassinate Hitler. For Harry it is an expression of his anger and horror of world events; Harry, a Jew, strongly identifies himself as part of the oppressed group. Mick finds the fantasy of being involved in an assassination attempt alluring because she would be able to take a masculine, active role in it. "And even if they died they would all be heroes. To be a hero was almost like being a great musician... [Mick says] I'd like to fight the fascists. I could dress up like a boy and nobody could ever tell. Cut my hair off and all" (209). Harry does not contradict her active role in these fantasies. He either is used to Mick's transgender nature or does not demand gender-based behavior from her. Perhaps his interest in

personal freedom and in the socialist ideas of the town radical Jake Blount allows him to accept Mick as she is. Mick, however, envies the freedom of choice Harry has as a male.

‘One thing I’ve thought about,’ Mick said. ‘A boy has a better advantage like that than a girl. I mean a boy can usually get some kind of part-time job that don’t take him out of school and leaves him time for other things. But there’s not jobs like that for girls. When a girl wants a job she has to quit school and work full time. I’d sure like to earn a couple of bucks a week like you do, but there’s just not any way.’ (210)

Harry has a strict sense of moral right and wrong, but these beliefs do not apply to personal individuality. “You know all the pictures of the people our age in Europe marching and singing songs and keeping step together. I used to think that was wonderful. All of them pledged to each other and with one leader. All of them with the same ideals and marching in step together. ...I never knew what an awful thing that was” (211).

Mick’s first experience with sexual attraction happens accidentally while wrestling with Harry. After one of Harry’s serious monologues about the evils of fascism, Mick is at a loss for how to respond. She is uncomfortable with the emotional content of the monologue and responds with a juvenile attempt to pick a fight. What starts as masculine play turns into something surprisingly arousing for both Mick and Harry.

She butted Harry with her shoulder and he got a holt on her. They wrestled hard and laughed. She was the tallest but his hands were strong. He didn’t fight good enough and she got him on the ground. Then suddenly he stopped moving and she stopped too. His breathing was warm on her neck and he was very still. She felt his ribs against her knees and his hard breathing as she sat on him. They got up together. They did not laugh any more and the alley was very quiet. As they walked across the dark back yard for some reason she felt funny. There was nothing to feel queer about, but suddenly it had just happened. (213)

From here the pair strike up a meaningful friendship. Both share their ideas on a daily basis after school. For once, Mick belongs in a ‘bunch’ (or at least bonding) of her own, and is on her way to gaining the understanding of another.

Part Two, Chapter Eleven: A Subconscious Seduction

With the Spring, Harry and Mick both become restless. As with the prom party, Mick plans another step into womanhood by borrowing her older sisters’ clothing.

A happy feeling came in her because it was true they were real good friends. Also he was handsome. Tomorrow she would borrow Hazel’s blue necklace and wear the silk dress ... She watched him until he turned the corner. It was true that he had grown to be a very good-looking fellow. (229)

Both Mick and Harry treat the picnic as a date. Harry follows the social script and provides the meal and treats for drinks. At the country store Harry follows Mick’s lead, changing his order for chocolate Nehi to beer as his drink of choice even though he considers under-age drinking to be a sin. His lack of tolerance for alcohol causes him to become intoxicated with his first bottle. “Harry was talking loud and he kept laughing without any reason. ...’Gosh, the beer along with the hot sun makes me dizzy. But I sure do feel good,’ he said” (231).

His willingness to follow Mick’s lead as well as his intoxication make Harry open to Mick’s suggestion of swimming naked. Essentially, this is nothing more than a masculine attempt on Mick’s part to lead the day’s events. Her dare leads to their first sexual experience. She cannot focus on it during or after--she begins the obsessive-compulsive counting to help her block it out of her mind (235). She feels she has changed visibly and permanently from child to adult, a transition she resents (236). Mick did not enjoy the experience and abhors the repetition of this role she would have to play as a wife; she never wants to have sex again. “She felt very old, and it was like something was heavy inside her. She was a grown person now, whether she wanted to be or not” (236). Also ashamed, Harry runs away to hide his sin from his mother’s eyes. As a

male, he can leave home and find a job and create for himself a new life. Mick, however, is trapped in feminine passivity. She hopes that someone can tell what has happened to her, to understand that she is no longer a child but a newborn adult faced with the possibility of pregnancy and haunted by the prospect of her future as a woman.

Part Two, Chapter 14: Death of the Inside Room

With the loss of her virginity and her best friend Harry, Mick desperately needs somewhere to turn. In the past she has supplemented the meager rewards of her real life with the fantasies of wealth, fame, and love in her inside room. Her inability to cope with the traumatic sexual experience makes the inside room dangerous: Mick can no longer trust herself to be alone with her thoughts.

Now she could not stay in the inside room. She had to be around somebody all the time. Doing something every minute. And if she was by herself she counted or figured with numbers. She counted all the roses on the living-room wall-paper. She figured out the cubic area of the whole house. She counted every blade of grass in the back yard and every leaf on a certain bush. Because if she did not have her mind on numbers this terrible afraidness came in her. (262)

In addition to compulsively counting objects, Mick's obsession with Mr. Singer intensifies. Mick now follows Singer everywhere, creating a pattern for her day which hinges on Singer's routine. She uses Singer as a surrogate inside room, since her encounters with him are scripted by her own mind (Singer merely smiles and nods with false understanding). "So long as she could see him and be near him she was right happy. But sometimes this queer feeling would come to her and she knew that she was doing wrong. So she tried hard to keep busy at home" (266). Unfortunately, she cannot find the love and acceptance she needs within her household.

Mick pesters Bubber incessantly with ploys to share a sleepless night with her, to keep her mind from "figuring with decimals" (268). His love for her is the unconditional and uneventful

familial love; Bubber accepts her without a moment's thought because she has always been there as sister and mother-figure. Mick can no longer get what she needs from him, though, because she misses the relationship she had with Harry and wishes to have a real love relationship. But Harry is gone and her mind will not let her recall the disastrous end of that relationship. The safest target for Mick is Singer. "She said his name over and over. She loved him better than anyone in the family, better even than George or her Dad. It was a different love. It was not like anything she had ever felt in her life before" (268). Mick can fantasize all she likes about Singer because he will never become accessible to her. As the many other characters in the novel do, Mick recreates Singer as she needs him to be. He is good, pure, and understanding; he is her own personal Jesus.

Although Mick's inside room is now virtually off limits to her, she is able to work with her music through her obsessive-compulsive need to block reflection on her sexuality. "Finally she was able to work hard at music again. She began to write down pieces for the violin and piano. She wrote songs. Always music was in her mind" (270). Mick has managed to transfer her counting and figuring to musical construction--an intense concentration on the manipulation of notes to keep her mind occupied. This has had a noticeable effect on her personality; Portia, the family cook, notes the change in Mick: "'What ails Mick?' Portia asked. 'What kind of cat is it got her tongue? She walk around and don't say a word. She not even greedy like she used to be. She getting to be a regular lady these days'" (270). Unfortunately, Mick's calm is not a magical transition into femininity. It is the calm before the storm which Bubber had predicted would drown them (136), the storm which broke the back of a sea-gull (36) in one of Mick's "childish paintings of disasters," reflecting her anxiety (Westling 343).

The final step into womanhood, for Mick, is when she accepts a job at Woolworth's. She stumbles into this job to win her family's approval.

For a minute she had been scared they would try to corner her into taking the job.

She would have said she would run away from home. But the way they took the

attitude they did touched her. She felt excited. They were all talking about her - and in a kindly way. She was ashamed for her first scared feeling that had come to her. Of a sudden she loved all of the family and a tightness came in her throat. (McCullers 271)

Once more, Mick dares herself into a compromising position simply to gain the love of the people she's with. At the prom party she led the group of wild adolescents in any new stunt (98); on the picnic she dared Harry to swim naked (233). In each instance her need for love and acceptance overrode her senses and she made a decision that conflicts with her true desires. In this case it is almost as if her family used reverse psychology to trick Mick into taking the job. If they had not so lovingly protested against her giving up school to take the job, she probably would have let the matter drop. Being the sudden center of attention, Mick starts to perform as if she were in the spotlight. Her mature performance of altruistically sacrificing herself to help meet the financial needs of the Kelly family masks her true feelings of fear at the proposition of giving up what is left of her childhood and accepting the demands of the adult world.

Mick looks for understanding in Mr. Singer, her sounding board. Since he is not there, she wanders off in the dark to find him. She is no longer the brave tomboy; having faced the reality and hazards of sexuality, Mick now shares the fears of girls her age (86) and, frightened of the potential of rape, runs back home (273).

Interestingly, Mick's steps into femininity are always preceded by the use of her older sisters' clothes. In this case, Hazel and Etta dress her in their hand-me-downs and transform her into a sixteen year old girl. With resignation, she faces her first job: "it was too late to turn back now. She was really grown and ready to earn her keep" (273).

Part Three, Chapter 3: What Good Was It?

Once again, we are introduced to Mick in Biff's New York Cafe. No longer the swaggering tomboy, this Mick is tired and angry in her latest feminine role. Now the young

working woman, she feels trapped in the capitalist cycle: “all that came of it was this trap--the store, then home to sleep, and back at the store again” (299). Playing the part takes its toll on her physically, as her feet and back ache from the long hours, and her face is frozen into a grimace of a smile.

Once she was out of the store she had to frown a long time to get her face natural again. Even her ears were tired. She took off the dangling green earrings and pinched the lobes of her ears, She had bought the earrings the week before -- and also a silver bangle bracelet. ... There was a run in her stocking... and she had stuck a little piece of chewing-gum on the end. But even that didn't help. Now she would have to go home and sew. It was hard to know what she could do about stockings. She wore them out so fast. Unless she was the kind of common girl that would wear common stockings. (299-300)

Even uncomfortable in the role of a salesgirl, Mick frets about her need to dress the part accurately and her desire to be more than a “common girl.”

Although she plays the part of a young woman, Mick is still teetering between child and adult. Her choice of ice-cream treats the angry inner child; the beer numbs the tired adult after a hard day of work. Her current role has conditioned her to concentrate on money and even as she dines on beer and ice-cream, she is angry that she hadn't instead saved the 20 cents to repair her worn-out shoes. She is now like the rest of the working Kelly family, for whom “money was the main thing. All the time it was money, money, money” (203). She pays money for the pleasure of listening to the radio; she plans to save money for a used piano, which she fantasizes about protecting from eventual repossession: “she would meet them at the front door. And fight. She would knock down both the two men so they would have shiners and broke noses and would be passed out on the hall floor” (302).

This version of Mick is no longer driven by the need for others' acceptance, as demonstrated by her refusal to dine and talk with Biff: “Now he always wanted to talk to her. But she wanted to be quiet and by herself” (301). She is also alienated from her music: “A song she

had started in her private notebook two months before was still not finished. And she wanted to stay in the inside room but she didn't know how. It was like the inside room was locked somewhere away from her" (301). Perhaps the isolation is indicative of Mick's shock at finding the one link between the inside and outside room, Mr. Singer, dead. Her single link to creativity and her greatest crush is gone.

Every step of the way, Mick has taken on increasingly feminine roles in order to gain the love and acceptance of those around her. She has changed herself to follow the prescribed gender roles of her southern society, yet only becomes more alienated from herself and others. "McCullers makes us see that the smothering of Mick's ambitions coincides with her acceptance of adult femininity... Within a year of the symbolic [prom] party, Mick is trapped in a narrow adult world which reduces her to little more than a machine" (Westling 343-44). At the novel's end, she is a bitter young woman in tired hand-me-down girl clothes, but the need for music, the desire for an artistic escape from the common life, channels her anger to determination:

But maybe it would be true about the piano and turn out O.K. Maybe she would get a chance soon. Else what the hell good had it all been -- the way she felt about music and all the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good. (McCullers 302)

The fighter in Mick, the inner tomboy, is still alive, though only in the 'inside room.' Instead of breaking through her latest role, she numbly follows the routine of the work week. Mick's ambition to break through the monotony is as incomplete in the "outside room" as her symphony, "That Thing I Want, I know Not What."

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