The Southern Misfit and the Dream of Escape in the Fiction of Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor

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THE SOUTHERN MISFIT AND THE DREAM OF ESCAPE IN THE
FICTION OF CARSON MCCULLERS AND FLANNERY O'CONNOR

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Western Kentucky University
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Master of Arts

by
Tammy L. Oberhausen

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THE SOUTHERN MISFIT AND THE DREAM OF ESCAPE IN THE
FICTION OF CARSON MCCULLERS AND FLANNERY O'CONNOR

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Introduction</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Historical and Literary Significance of</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Misfit and the Dream of Escape</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Carson McCullers's Southern Girls</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Flannery O'Connor's Southern &quot;Interlekuls&quot;</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The misfit and the dream of escape are popular motifs in American literature, particularly in the literature of the South. Critical studies of works employing these themes have largely ignored the connection between the two. The Southern misfit—the Southerner who fails to or refuses to conform to his society's strict standards—often dreams of escaping the restrictions of the South for some Northern "promised land." In the works of two Georgia writers, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor, the related themes receive very different treatments. Carson McCullers's misfits in the novels *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Member of the Wedding* are adolescent girls who fail to meet their society's expectations to be ladylike and free of personal ambitions, and McCullers seems sympathetic to her misfits' longing to escape. In Flannery O'Connor's short stories, her misfits are often intellectuals who feel unappreciated and alienated in their "culturally stagnant" hometowns, but O'Connor usually demonstrates that the real problem of these intellectuals is not the restrictions of the South but the characters' own lack of self-awareness.
Introduction

Because of the Southern emphasis on community and one's place in it, the misfit—the Southerner who cannot or will not accept the role designated for him in his society—appears frequently in twentieth-century Southern fiction. Likewise, the dream of escaping the South for the city or some Northern "promised land" recurs in works by Southern authors. What has not been explored in previous studies is the connection between these two central themes of Southern literature—the theme of the misfit and the theme of longing to escape the restrictions of the South.

The connection between these two themes will be examined in the works of two Georgia women—Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor. The two authors have often been compared because of their use of grotesque characters, but, in fact, their purposes for using such characters are quite different. In *The True Country: Themes in the Fiction of Flannery O'Connor*, Carter W. Martin notes that "Gothicism and grotesqueness are outward properties of the fiction and do not entail thematic congruency with other Gothic works" (158), and this is certainly true of the fiction of McCullers and O'Connor. While McCullers uses grotesque characters to convey the horror of human isolation and the
need for fulfillment through love, O'Connor uses grotesques to demonstrate spiritual depravity and the human need for redemption through Christ. Other significant differences exist: McCullers's works convey a hopelessness while O'Connor's present the hope that Christian redemption offers; McCullers presents her characters sympathetically while O'Connor recognizes the absurdities and shortcomings of her characters. Their differences were great enough that, though the two of them were born and raised in the same state and shared literary popularity at about the same time, O'Connor wrote in a letter to Janet McKane, "I dislike intensely the work of Carson McCullers [sic] . . ." ("Letters" 1195). And in response to the suggestion that she and McCullers might find conversation stimulating, O'Connor said in an unpublished letter quoted by Kathleen Feeley in Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock, "I'm sure we would have nothing to say to each other" (21).

Yet, despite their very different styles and philosophies, both writers present characters who refuse to or are unable to accept their place in Southern society and who leave or dream of leaving the South. Indeed, the very fact that two Southern writers with such contradictory outlooks and personalities rely on the same themes reinforces the significance of the themes in Southern thought. Though their characters have similar experiences as misfits, the impetus for their characters' desire to escape the South is different for each writer.
Two of Carson McCullers's misfits—Mick in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* and Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*—are isolated in part because their ambitions and values do not coincide with their society's expectations of females. Mick wants to travel the world as a concert pianist. Frankie declares herself a freak because of her inability to find an acceptable role in which she feels comfortable. Both realize that the opportunities for them to pursue their dreams and express their individuality are not available in their communities.

Many of O'Connor's misfits—Hulga in "Good Country People," Mary Grace in "Revelation," Wesley in "Greenleaf," Julian in "Everything that Rises Must Converge," and Asbury in "The Enduring Chill"—perceive themselves as intellectuals and feel alienated in the South because of their interests. They claim to long for escape from their provincial communities, but either circumstances prevent them from leaving or they lack motivation and confidence to make a move and prefer to remain, using their intellectuality as an excuse for their not being accepted in their communities.

Thus, in the works of McCullers and O'Connor one finds not only the themes of the misfit in the South and the longing to escape the South but also fertile ground for exploring the various and sometimes complex connections between the two.
Chapter I

Historical and Literary Significance of
The Southern Misfit and the Dream of Escape

Perhaps no theme in American literature is so basic to the American experience, to every American's identity, as the theme of the misfit. America is, after all, a nation of misfits—people or children of people from somewhere else trying to find a place in which to belong and flourish. The "melting pot" of America has actually served to further that sense of alienation in spite of the term's suggestion that the customs and ideas of the people involved are somehow melted into one "American" identity. Instead, individuals find that the sense of racial, religious, or national identity their forefathers relied upon is not so clear-cut in America. Rather than feel a bond with others in their ethnic community or with the other "elements" in the melting pot, they experience a confusion about their place in society and a realization that they are, in fact, a part of nothing, that they are isolated from not only "their kind" but all kinds.

The theme of longing to escape, like the theme of the misfit, is a staple in American literature, though it is a more recent development, having emerged with America's
maturation from a young, idealistic union to a more powerful empire. And, like the misfit, the expatriate or disillusioned American is not merely a literary convention but a real social phenomenon. As America transformed itself from a frontier to a powerhouse, many Americans found the American Dream increasingly less attainable. In life and literature, this disillusionment and dissatisfaction manifested itself in dreams of other lands—either a "return" to Europe or a push west to the American Frontier. Things were bound to be better, Americans assumed, in the idealized faraway land.

The American South is a region particularly suited to an examination of the linking themes of the misfit and the dream of escape. Southern society has developed in a separate direction from the rest of the country. Werner Sollors observes in Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture, "It has... become customary to study the South by contrasting it, not with another region (such as the North), but with the whole 'rest of the country'" (176). Indeed, on nearly any nationwide opinion poll, vote, or issue, the South stands alone in its beliefs and values. Evidence of this uniqueness is the abiding influence of the Old South's caste structure. Largely because of this caste structure, the place of the individual within the community is much more crucial to the Southerner than it is to the non-Southerner. In The Faraway Country: Writers of the Modern South, Louis D.
Rubin, Jr. notes of the Old South,
The nature and hold of the Southern community provided, however innocently, a sufficient complex emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic order to accommodate all its members. That such an order was not sufficiently viable and durable is not the question; to its participants it seemed so at the time. (19)

Therefore, the misfit, the individual who cannot or will not accept his place in the society, is faced with an acute sense of alienation from his society and, consequently, a sudden awareness of and attraction to the "outside," the non-South.

Certainly this intense desire to escape the South is not felt by those Southerners who feel in tune with the social expectations of the region. But the acute sensibilities of some discerning Southerners make them unable to accept the roles they are expected to play and the inequities they experience and see around them. For many sensitive Southerners, the realization is akin to a more universal "coming of age." In North Toward Home, Willie Morris's book about his own experiences as a Southerner and Southern expatriate, Morris recalls he was fourteen or fifteen when, sitting in study hall and gazing out the window he "felt overcome for no reason at all by the likelihood of a great other world out there" (125). In Womenfolks: Growing Up Down South, Shirley Abbott makes a
similar discovery at a comparable age: "Sometime, probably in my early teens, I began dimly to grasp that the glorious Southland was not what I had taken it to be" (182).

While reasons for leaving the South vary, all are related to some inadequacy perceived by the individual or a refusal on the part of society to allow a group to improve its position in the social structure. The Southern woman who refuses to accept the role her society has ordained for her is one misfit who has found it advantageous to leave the South. In fiction as well as life, the Southern woman is faced with her society's expectations of ladylike behavior, and, if she refuses or is unable to meet those expectations, she must join the ranks of the Southern misfits, longing at once for escape and assimilation.

A woman's place in the society of the Old South was quite clear-cut. Every aspect of every Southern woman's existence was expected to match the ideal for her position in the Old South's caste system. According to Anne Goodwyn Jones, author of Tomorrow is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936, "southern womanhood was born in the imaginations of white slaveholding men" (8). But the white, upper-class Southern lady, with her grace, hospitality, and beauty, was not merely an ideal for every Southern woman to attempt to emulate. Jones writes that "the southern lady is at the core of a region's self-definition; the identity of the South is
contingent in part upon the persistence of its tradition of the lady” (4). Indeed, the image of the Southern lady "represents her culture's idea of religious, moral, sexual, racial, and social perfection" (9). Obviously, a region so enamoured of its ideal and unrealistic lady that it required her to be the embodiment of its society would look with disfavor upon any woman who denied and refused to follow the accepted standards for the Southern lady.

A number of factors kept Southern women from denouncing the rigid role the Old South had designated for them. Clement Eaton points out in Freedom of Thought in the Old South that the women's rights movement developing in the South struck a barrier for several reasons. First of all, "the feminist movement to the North had grown up in close alliance with the abolitionist movement" (318). The South's strong religious ties apparently played a part as well: Eaton writes that "Pauline theology, which had a tenacious hold on the Southern churches, was hostile to feminine assertiveness" (318). In addition, part of the Southern fable created by white slaveholding men was the courtly tradition with its very definite expectations of how ladies and gentlemen should conduct themselves. Thus, Eaton notes, "the prevailing romanticism of the South was incompatible with the attempt of the feminists to equalize the sexes" (318). Finally, as Eaton observes,

the energies of so many Southern women who might have grown restive under masculine rule were
used up in childbearing. . . . These women . . . could hardly have had much leisure or desire to crusade for women's rights. (318)

The lady of the Old South knew very well her expected position in society and the behavior she was required to exhibit in order to be accepted by that society.

The independent-minded Southern woman has been hard-pressed to establish her own niche in Southern society even with the demise of the Old South. Shirley Abbott observes quite accurately that "[t]he South, though it claims to be the cradle of rebellion, has never tolerated nonconformism in its women" (198). The woman with a penchant for intellectual pursuits, as Abbott notes, is an especial oddity in the South:

The ultimate piece of nonconformism for a Southern woman is bookishness or any ostentatious devotion to learning. It is even more likely to isolate her from her class than are radical commitments or professional ambitions.

(202)

Nonconformism and the resulting alienation have prompted Southern women to leave (or at least dream of leaving) the South for some land more hospitable to their convictions and ambitions. In her chapter titled "Why Southern Women Leave Home," Abbott remarks that she has known many black and white women who left the old segregated South, "not wishing to participate in--or be
victimized by--a system that operated largely for the finan-
cancial benefit of white men" (191-2). Abbott further
states that some Southern women run away
from the ramshackle mythology of ladies and
belles, virtuous Christian motherhood, and all
the rest of it, sometimes in loathing but as
often as not with a touch of regret for their
own failure to measure up. (192)

Another "outsider" in the South is the intellectual.
To the present, the South has lagged behind the rest of
the country in its educational system: schools in the
Old South, if they existed at all, were inadequate and
available only to the wealthy, and through the twentieth
century with segregation, illiteracy, and high drop-out
rates, the South continued to hold its place as the worst
educated region of the country. In A Sacred Circle: The
Dilemma of the Intellectual in the Old South, 1840-1860,
Drew Gilpin Faust writes:

In the Old South, elementary education, even to
the level of basic literacy, was a privilege
[sic] rather than a right. . . . [The] defi-
ciencies did not affect only the individuals
left ignorant and untaught. Perhaps more im-
portant, they represented a general lack of in-
tellectual leadership and commitment on the part
of the literate majority. (8)

Bruce Clayton notes in The Savage Ideal: Intolerance and
Intellectual Leadership in the South, 1890-1914,

In the 1890s illiteracy prevailed in the South. Fully one-fourth of all Southerners lacked even the basic skills of reading and writing. Public schools were open only three or four months a year, and the teachers were ill prepared and underpaid. There were private preparatory academies but almost no public schools to fill the gap between the inadequate primary schools and the colleges and universities. (109)

The South's record on education obviously illustrates a lack of commitment to intellectual pursuits, and the Southern intellectual finds himself in a society in which education is undervalued, "culture" is scorned, and the educated are mistrusted or ridiculed.

Drew Gilpin Faust's book, A Sacred Circle, is about a group of Southern thinkers who, in the 1840s, "united in an effort to establish a role for men of mind in their region" (x). The "sacred circle" was "a network of mutual emotional and intellectual support" for the members--novelist William Gilmore Simms, politician James Henry Hammond, agricultural reformer Edmund Ruffin, and professors Nathaniel Beverley Tucker and George Frederick Holmes--all of whom "believed that their innate genius had exiled them" (x). Faust posits that while "many Southerners of the late ante-bellum period were well aware of the intellectual deficiencies of their region . . . on an
objective, institutional level the South did little to encourage or support the life of the mind" (7). As a result, intellectuals like those in the "sacred circle" felt a deep sense of alienation and isolation in their Southern communities. These Southern thinkers regarded themselves as "lonely and unappreciated," and "the intellect they saw as their defining attribute seemed to have no place within the South and no role in arresting regional decline" (3).

However, Rubin argues in The Faraway Country that "intellectual activity, such as it was, was ... a community affair" and that "the intellectual was not cut off from his society" (5). But he adds that the Southern intellectual who had gone to college and come back to play a part in his community

was not, in fact, what we would call an intellectual at all, for the very term presupposes a primary allegiance to ideas, to the life of the mind, as against everyday preoccupation in a world of things. (5)

Apparently, Rubin would suggest that the intellectual cannot be given over wholly to the pursuit of ideas and remain an integral part of his Southern community.

The intellectual's displacement in the South did not end with the South's defeat in the Civil War or with the arrival of the twentieth century. Even with the improved educational opportunities the twentieth century afforded Southerners, Shirley Abbott declares that
in every [college] graduating class, there were always one or two or three students who discovered, even as they accepted their diplomas, that a liberal education had somehow rendered them unfit for Southern life. (191)

These students who took so seriously to ideas, intellect, and culture were seen as repudiating the simple values determined by their Southern hometowns to be superior. Actually, the fact that they had discovered "ideas" at all separated them from their society's mainstream. Willie Morris contrasts the experiences of the Eastern intellectual and the Southern intellectual: the Easterners' struggle, he says, was "for one set of ideas over others," and their going to Ivy League schools "involved, if not a finishing, then a deepening of perceptions, or of learning, or culture" (149). But the awakening for most Southerners who attended college

did not mean a mere finishing or deepening, and most emphatically did not imply the victory of one set of idealogies over another, but something more basic and simple. This was the acceptance of ideas themselves as something worth living by. It was a matter, at the age of eighteen or nineteen, not of discovering certain books, but the simple presence of books, not the nuances of idea and feeling, but idea and feeling on their own terms. (149-50)
Certainly, then, the Southern intellectual felt alienated and unappreciated in a region so bereft of education and ideas. This identification as a misfit often resulted in the intellectual's desire for an environment more amenable to his interests: the North, and most specifically, New York City. On the subject of why he and other would-be writers from the South converged on New York City, Morris writes:

We had always come, the most ambitious of us, because we had to, because the ineluctable pull of the cultural capital when the wanderlust was high was too compelling to resist. (318)

In the "cultural capital" Southern intellectuals believed they could find their "place"; there, unlike in their culturally stagnant, small Southern hometowns, they could express their own ideas and hear the informed ideas of others.

While staying in the South is a source of frustration, alienation, and dissatisfaction for so many Southerners for so many reasons, leaving the South is not without its own pathos. Naturally, the security and familiarity of any homeplace are difficult to leave behind. In the South, the greater emphasis on community and family makes the idea of leaving especially complicated. For families that have lived together in the same town, perhaps even the same house, for generations, the member who seeks fulfillment outside is often regarded as an odd and perplexing traitor.
Southerners who had happy, idyllic childhoods in small towns and on farms find their sentimental ties to the place of their upbringing are great. And the rigidly defined roles people play in any Southern community, though onerous to many Southerners while they are in the South, are a source of security, comfort, and identity difficult to abandon when the Southerner is faced with leaving.

The physical leaving of the South is actually only a part of the spiritual break Southern misfits make with their society. As Shirley Abbott puts it, "There are many ways of leaving besides on a bus or a plane" (202). The social reality is that Southerners, like Abbott, Willie Morris, and others, who become self-conscious and "South-conscious" (aware that there is a larger world outside, with different and often less limiting values than those of the South) can never really be at home in their inflexible communities once that realization is made. In The Faraway Land, Rubin says, "One cannot be mentally detached from the Southern community while physically a part of it, and be fully a member of that community" (11). Some who acquire this consciousness of the South continue to live in the South geographically if not spiritually. Others make the next step and take their stand not to live and die in Dixie.

What did the Southern expatriates find when they reached the "promised land"? Often, their first experiences were with the prejudices of many non-Southerners. When, during her childhood, Shirley Abbott's family moved from
Arkansas to San Diego for a short time, she "realized for the first time that some people didn't think Southerners were human" (180). Expecting to establish herself as the teacher's pet in school as she had always done before, she was instead checked for head lice and asked by a little boy if she had hookworm and if the shoes she wore were her first pair. The experience, she says, "taught me that, for some reason I had never before suspected, the South was alien, and you paid a price for coming from it" (181). Her experience as a newcomer to New York City shortly after her college graduation in the 1950s was quite similar: "By then I had wised up to the fact that to be female as well as Southern was construed as evidence of slow wits" (209).

Adjustment was often complicated by inner conflicts as well. For a young person from the provinces who came to New York City, Willie Morris observes,

> It became dangerously easy to turn one's back on his own past, on the isolated places that nurtured and shaped him into maturity, for the sake of some convenient or fashionable "sophistication." There were temptations to be not merely careless, but dishonest, with the most distinctive things about one's self. . . . Coming to New York for the first time, the sensitive outlander might soon find himself in a subtle interior struggle with himself, over the most fundamental sense and meaning of his own origins. (318-9)
Other factors hindered Southerners' achievement of satisfaction in the North. Filth and smog replaced their familiar green fields and fresh air. Overpopulation and crowds replaced the space to which they were accustomed. Fast paced, impersonal treatment replaced the friendly familiarity many of them knew in the South.

Some transplanted Southerners, needless to say, never lasted long outside the South. The pull of their homeland, its fresh air and open spaces, even along with its narrowness of experience and opportunity, was too great to resist. But even those who never returned to the South to live often felt, as Morris says his fellow Mississippi expatriates felt,

alienated from home yet forever drawn back to it, seeking some form of personal liberty elsewhere yet obsessed with the texture and the complexity of the place from which they had departed . . .

(320)

Southern expatriates who returned to the South whether to visit or to remain often found, as Thomas Wolfe's George Webber did, that "you can't go home again." What the transplanted Southerner learned outside the South, writes Rubin, confirmed him in his inability to accept the conditions of Southern life any more. . . . While living away he had known a strong sentimental attachment to his home community and its ways. But he found that he could not put down his roots
again, for the soil was too thin. For better or worse he had become confirmed in perspectives, interests, attitudes that set him apart from his neighbors in the old community. (*The Faraway Country* 10)

The conflicting desires to escape and to remain that Southerners faced before leaving the South rarely were adequately resolved, it would seem, for transplanted Southerners were likely to find that the indifference and impersonality of the North, or non-South, were as difficult to accept as the injustice and narrowness of the South.

Since the phenomenon of leaving the South is so predominant among contemplative Southerners, it is not surprising that Southern writers have themselves experienced dissatisfaction with their region, desire to escape the South, disillusionment with the outside, and feelings of being the outsider upon returning home. Also not surprising is the fact that many Southern writers have chosen to place their characters in similar situations to face those same conflicts.

Such has not always been the case in Southern literature, however. Southern writers of the nineteenth century by and large did not address dissatisfaction with the Southern way of life in their fiction, and, though some did experience it in their own lives, few Southern writers acted on their dissatisfaction and moved away. Rubin
points out in The Writer in the South that while nineteenth-century writers like William Gilmore Simms, Henry Timrod, George W. Cable, and Joel Chandler Harris lamented the South's preoccupation with politics to the exclusion of imaginative literature . . . the South's unwillingness to allow its writers to criticize their homeland . . . [and] the South's abiding taste for literary mediocrity, (9) these writers "complained, and then kept right on living and writing in the South" (10-11). The literary tradition in the South, such as it was, was "always subordinate to the general patterns of community life, and did not exact the kind of intensity and singleminded devotion that we associate with important artistic attainment" (Faraway 5). Because the nineteenth-century Southern writer did not make the "spiritual break from the standards of his culture," most of the literature is, Rubin suggests, "superficial and shallow, designed to appeal to an audience that did not want its own values and its social arrangements held up to critical scrutiny" (Writer 30).

Unlike the typical genteel Southern writer of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who was, as Rubin notes, "not an exile, either spiritually or geographically" (Writer 6), the Southern writer after the First World War is largely cut off from the daily existence of his fellow Southerners, whether he continues to live
in the South or not. He has outgrown the dimensions of his community. (7)
The twentieth-century Southern writer's alienation from his society has paid off in the quality of his work in a way that the nineteenth-century Southern writer's acceptance of his society could not:

Instead of taking care to display the home folks to the world as attractively as possible, he has sought to present them with the utmost moral and critical intensity of which he is capable. Instead of uncritically accepting the political, social, and ethical values of his community, he has conducted a continuing and often agonizing critique of those values. His art has been crafted out of a deep sense of familiarity with the texture of community life, but also of a momentous distancing of himself from the community.

(Writer 331)

Southern writers who judge themselves to be "on the fringe" of their society often create misfit characters similarly alienated from their communities. Thomas Wolfe's Eugene Gant in Look Homeward, Angel, for example, feels he is an outcast in his hometown of Altamont and in Pulpit Hill, where he attends the University. He addresses the society of which he never felt a part:

Ah, I'll tell you why you laugh; you are afraid of me because I am not like the others. You hate
me because I do not belong. You see that I am finer and greater than anyone you know; you cannot reach me and you hate me. (306)

In his article, "My Discovery of Thomas Wolfe," Franz Schoenberner observes Wolfe's own spiritual separation from his community: "Thomas Wolfe never belonged to any circle or any clique, he always belonged entirely and exclusively to himself and to his artistic task" (293-4).

Even William Faulkner, who lived most of his life in Oxford, Mississippi, and who "went on hunting trips with his friends, ... played golf and attended the Ole Miss football games" (Rubin Writer 31), was nevertheless a misfit in the community, geographically and sometimes socially a citizen of Oxford but not one spiritually. As Rubin states, Faulkner quarreled deeply with the opinions of most of his fellow citizens on the most important political and social issues of his day, and he did not speak for most of Mississippi when he wrote about such issues. (31)

Like Wolfe, Faulkner creates a character, Quentin Compson, who feels not quite at home in the South and yet unable to shake its hold on him.

Often after the realization of one's outsider status comes the geographical disengagement from the South. Rubin points out, "The Southern writers who created the memorable literature of our own time almost all went North at one
time or the other" (Faraway 8). And these writers endowed their characters with similar dreams of faraway places that promised to be more congenial to their attitudes and ambitions. In The Web and the Rock, Thomas Wolfe writes of George Webber's dream of "The Golden City" of the North:

at the end, forever at the end of all the fabled earth, there hung the golden vision of the city, itself more fertile, richer, more full of joy and bounty than the earth it rested on. Far-off and shining, it rose upward in his vision from an opalescent mist, upborne, and sustained as lightly as a cloud, yet firm and soaring with full golden light. It was a vision simple, unperplexed, carved from deep substances of light and shade, and exultant with its prophecy of glory, love, and triumph. (91)

Southern writers who leave the South--and then lead their characters along that same path--often find that the "golden city" is not what they had expected. Ralph Ellison's protagonist in Invisible Man expresses a longing to leave New York City and return South:

I've sometimes been overcome with a passion to return into that "heart of darkness" across the Mason-Dixon line, but then I remind myself that the true darkness lies within my own mind, and the idea loses itself in the gloom. Still the passion persists. Sometimes I feel the need to
reaffirm all of it, the whole unhappy territory 
and all the things loved and unlovable in it, for 
all of it is a part of me. (437)

While in the city, many Southern writers find their 
homes are never far from their minds. In Thomas Wolfe's 
Characters, Floyd C. Watkins writes, "His homesickness for 
Asheville and the South seems to have been a controlling 
emotion during his years away. There was tragedy in his 
discovery that he could not return home again . . ." (158). 
When he did return to Asheville for a short while, he dis­
covered that the spiritual break was, indeed, complete. 
Rubin observes that "[m]ost of the Southern writers did not 
remain in the metropolis" (Faraway 9), but the return home 
only confirmed their suspicions that they were spiritual 
misfits in the South.
Chapter II
Carson McCullers's Southern Girls

Among the many Southern writers who journeyed North to pursue their literary dreams, Carson McCullers, like Thomas Wolfe, expresses most deliberately the desire to escape the stifling provinciality of the South. McCullers's adolescent misfits—Mick in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter and Frankie in The Member of the Wedding—while not aware of a desire to escape the South as such, are certainly aware of the restrictions of their society and the differences which separate them from the children they once played with and the young women they come to feel they must imitate. Their inability to conform results in their fantasies of faraway places, places often characterized by ice and snow, where they will no longer feel "different."

Almost no critic has failed to point out the similarities between Carson McCullers's life and the lives of her young misfits, Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams. In Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor, Louise Westling notes that McCullers

was well known in her hometown as a deliberate eccentric who wore knickers or dresses that were
too long, cut her own hair in unfashionable shapes, wore the wrong socks and tennis shoes or Girl Scout oxfords, had smoked cigarettes for years, and went across the river to "Sin City," Alabama, to drink beer in bars frequented by soldiers from Fort Benning. (49)

Her tomboy ways and unconventional appearance separated the adolescent McCullers from other young ladies. In addition, she perceived herself as different from other girls because of her musical ability and ambitions. She fully expected to be famous one day, and her mother encouraged her confidence in the success which McCullers considered inevitable. Growing up as a "Southern female prodigy" (Perry 36), McCullers recognized that her dreams were incompatible with accepted standards for Southern ladies, and later she gave her bovish adolescent characters personalities and experiences quite similar to her own.

Like her characters Mick and Frankie, McCullers saw no future for herself in her hometown of Columbus, Georgia. Her dreams of leaving the South for more culturally satisfying environs began early. Writes Delma Eugene Presley in "Carson McCullers and the South":

To live in Columbus as those around her lived would have been a painful defeat for Lula Carson Smith [McCullers]. Always she felt the first step toward a fulfilling life was northward in direction. And she was anxious to begin the
McCullers was so anxious that she moved to New York City at age seventeen and began writing. In "Carson McCullers: The Aesthetic of Pain," Louis D. Rubin, Jr. explains the allure of New York City to McCullers and Southern writers in general:

There were to be found the writers and artists and teachers and publishers, the people who understood, as she thought, what was really worthwhile in life. New York was the place of art, of culture, of fulfillment, where the dreams of the lonely provincial could come true. (266)

At first, McCullers's presence in New York seemed the solution to the problem of her dissatisfaction and sense of alienation. Presley writes that McCullers found in Brooklyn "a place where she could relish being different, a sympathetic community in which she could find uncritical acceptance" (24). Such a place is precisely what Mick and Frankie yearn for. But just as many Southern writers and their characters find that escape is either impossible or unsatisfying, McCullers's move north was not entirely advantageous. She used her knowledge of the South and its people in her early works, but, as Presley notes, "once she abandoned the landscape of her agony, she wrote works which lack distinction" (19). Thus, her escape from a society she felt was culturally stifling did not ultimately provide her with an environment congenial to doing her best
writing; in fact, her greatest success came with the publication of her first novel, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, which she wrote while living in North Carolina.

Though the physical and emotional similarities between McCullers and her characters Mick and Frankie are great, one dissimilarity has puzzled some critics. While McCullers received encouragement and support for her ambitions, particularly from her mother, she provides her characters with no corresponding support systems. Constance M. Perry points out in "Carson McCullers and the Female Wunderkind" that "McCullers denies to her heroine [Mick] much that she herself experienced as a developing artist" (37). Neither Mick nor Frankie has a strong, supportive mother: Mick's mother is a shadowy character in the background and Frankie's mother is dead. Perhaps McCullers simply found the idea of a young talent, squelched, more poignant than the idea of a young girl realizing her dreams.

The sense of "differentness" McCullers felt as an ambitious young girl in the South is demonstrated in her use of grotesque, isolated characters in her fiction. To demonstrate the isolation every individual experiences, she developed characters whose physical or psychological differences symbolize the spiritual isolation and loneliness of all human beings. Some of her characters' deformities seem heavy-handed: the child-like hunchback Cousin Lymon
and the huge, manly Miss Amelia in "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe," the black cook Berenice with her blue glass eye in Member, the deaf mutes Singer and Antonopoulos in Heart. Several characters in her works seem a confused blend of both genders--Biff Brannon in Heart wears his wife's perfume after she dies and is attracted to Mick's boyish qualities; John Henry in Member dresses up in Berenice's hat and shoes and reveals his fantasy world in which people are "half boy and half girl" (118). Often, black characters in McCullers's works are so unusual that they experience isolation in spite of the security of black society. Dr. Copeland in Heart is alienated from black society by his education and ideas and from white society by his race. In Member, Berenice's light-skinned brother Honey Brown is, as Westling suggests, "[t]oo intelligent and restless to live comfortably in the circumscribed world of Sugarville, the black section of town" ("Carson McCullers's Tomboys" 347).

While many characters in both novels are misfits of one sort or another, the main characters are dreamy adolescent girls caught between childhood and womanhood. In "The Theme of Spiritual Isolation in Carson McCullers," Oliver Evans notes:

The phenomenon of adolescence has a peculiar fascination for Mrs. McCullers . . . and this too has its explanation, for at that age the sense of individual isolation is stronger than
at any other. Adolescence sets one apart just as effectively as does a physical or mental aberration: one is no longer a child, not yet an adult. Even one's sexual identity is ambiguous.

(338)

Both of McCullers's adolescents experience social pressures to take on the feminine roles other girls have assumed, but they are not accepted by the mature crowd and their artistic, unconventional natures further alienate them and prevent them from being "members" of any group they regard as desirable.

Just as their names suggest, both Mick and Frankie are bovish in appearance. McCullers uses references to "freaks" to demonstrate the outsider status each girl feels as a result of her unusual appearance. Their boyish ways were acceptable while they were children, but as they approach adulthood and sexual identity becomes more crucial, each experiences a crisis. As Westling observes, "As a girl the tomboy is charming; as an adult she is grotesque" ("Carson McCullers's Tomboys" 339).

The fact that Mick is an unconventional girl is established from the beginning. In the novel's first reference to Mick, McCullers writes:

A gangling, towheaded youngster, a girl of about twelve, stood looking in the doorway. She was dressed in khaki shorts, a blue shirt, and tennis shoes--so that at first glance she was like a
very young boy. (14)
Mick is obviously different from other girls her age who are beginning to see, if they have not already seen, themselves as feminine.

Biff Brannon, owner of the New York Cafe, establishes the light with which Mick is to be viewed in the novel: "He thought of her hoarse, boyish voice and of her habit of hitching up her khaki shorts and swaggering like a cowboy in the picture show. A feeling of tenderness came in him" (17). His affection for Mick takes on added meaning when shortly thereafter one reads the statement: "He had a special friendly feeling for sick people and cripples" (17). In much the same way that "sick people and cripples" are different, Mick is unusual. At a party she hosts she realizes that, at five feet six inches, she is out of the ordinary: "Every kid at the party was a runt beside her, except Harry, who was only a couple of inches shorter" (87). Her neighbor friend Harry offers little comfort when he tells her, "'Once I saw a lady at the fair who was eight and a half feet tall. But you probably won't grow that big'" (87).

Frankie in Member is also given physical characteristics that separate her from others her age. McCullers writes of Frankie:

This summer she was grown so tall that she was almost a big freak, and her shoulders were narrow, her legs too long. She wore a pair of
blue track shorts, a B.V.D. undervest, and she was barefooted. Her hair had been cut like a boy's, but it had not been cut for a long time and was now not even parted. (4-5)

At age twelve (the same age Mick is in Heart), Frankie is too tall to walk beneath the arbor in her backyard as she had always done before. This is disturbing not only because "other twelve-year-old people could still walk around inside, give shows, and have a good time" but also because "even small grown ladies could walk underneath the arbor" (9). Frankie feels a "member" of no group, at least in part because of her size. Like Mick, Frankie is tall for her age--"five feet five and three quarter inches tall" (21)--and the fear of becoming a freak is very real to her:

In the past year she had grown four inches, or at least that was what she judged. . . . If she reached her height on her eighteenth birthday, she had five and one-sixth growing years ahead of her. Therefore, according to mathematics and unless she could somehow stop herself, she would grow to be over nine feet tall. And what would be a lady who is over nine feet tall? She would be a Freak. (22)

Mick and Frankie are unique not in physical appearance only, however. They are psychologically quite different from other adolescent girls. While Mick's sisters think about movie stars and stand before the mirror primping all
day, Mick's thoughts are on a different plane: "She wanted to think for a long time about two or three certain people, to sing to herself, and to make plans" (28). Though her plans and dreams seem outlandish, they are not shallow like the pastimes of her sisters. In order to block out the inharmonious world around her and to think, Mick goes into her "inside room":

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 she was locked up by herself. (126)

In the "inside room," Mick can concentrate on music, which plays incessantly in her head. Her ambition is to become a great composer, but her dreams are not completely unmarred by the reality that her sex and her ambitions are incompatible. Mick dreams that she would have a whole symphony orchestra and conduct all of her music herself. She would stand up on the platform in front of the big crowds of people. To conduct the orchestra she would wear either a real man's evening suit or else a red dress spangled with rhinestones. (184)
One can see from this passage how a talented, ambitious girl in this society can experience a crisis of identity. About this passage Westling comments:

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. ("Carson McCullers's Tomboys" 342)

While Mick's oddness is demonstrated by her dissimilarity to her sisters, Frankie is contrasted with the teenage girls who are members of a club that meets behind her house. Frankie sees the girls, who have excluded her from the club, walking through her backyard to their clubhouse, where they have parties with boys. The club members excluded Frankie, saying she was "too young and mean" (14), but Frankie's active dream life makes it apparent that she does not share their sensibilities. Frankie, like Mick, is artistic and ambitious--she writes plays and performs them with the neighborhood children, and she plans to travel the world and be famous. At twelve, Frankie feels she is a member of neither the older girls' group nor the group of neighborhood children, with whom she can no longer put on shows under the arbor. Her unhappiness at being a misfit prompts her to try to become a "member of the wedding" and form her own group with her brother and his bride-to-be.

Rejecting femininity was fairly easy for Mick and
Frankie as children, but as adolescents they experience a tension between their ambitions—which are regarded in their society as masculine—and the submissive femininity society expects of them. Westling points out that in Mick and Frankie, "McCullers dramatizes the crisis of identity which faces ambitious girls as they leave childhood and stumble into an understanding of what the world expects them to become" ("Carson McCullers's Tomboys" 339). Both girls make halting attempts at becoming feminine. Mick dresses up in her sister's long blue evening dress, white pumps, and rhinestone tiara, but even with her feminine ensemble her image of herself is confused: she "decided she either looked like a sap or else she looked very beautiful" (84). Thus, Mick's feminine clothes are not enough to save her from being a misfit. Significantly, with her new clothes, she "didn't feel like herself at all. She was somebody different from Mick Kelly entirely" (84). In this way, McCullers begins to establish what the reader is later to discover—in order for the dreamy, unconventional Southern girl to become a woman, she must abandon what "feels like herself" and become "somebody different."

Frankie also faces social pressures to be feminine. In Part Two of Member, Frankie changes her name to F. Jasmine because, first of all, she wants to sound like a member of the "group" made up of her brother Jarvis and his future wife Janice, and, secondly, because she feels
she must abandon the boyish "Frankie" to enter womanhood. F. Jasmine tries to be a lady, but her tomboy nature is still very much a part of her. Westling calls F. Jasmine, with her pink organdie dress, lipstick, and Sweet Serenade perfume, "a romantic caricature of a female" ("Carson McCullers's Tomboys" 342). She visits the Blue Moon, a hotel frequented by soldiers, and talks to a soldier who thinks she is older than she is. But despite her mature appearance, Frankie/F. Jasmine does not understand the soldier's "double-talk" (161). Unfamiliar with adult undertones and the proper responses to his joking remarks, Frankie finds that "their two conversations would not join together, and underneath there was a layer of queerness she could not place and understand" (161). Again, the adolescent is a misfit--here she appears to be an adult, feels like a child, and is a confused blend of both.

Each of McCullers's adolescent characters reacts to her inability to "fit in" to any group she deems desirable by dreaming of escaping to some faraway land, usually north because the ice and snow provide such an exotic contrast to the stifling hot Georgia summer. Mick's frustrations as an artistic Southern girl are embodied in the "blazing hot" temperatures that summer:

The glare was so bright it hurt to keep your eyes open. A lot of times the plans about the things that were going to happen to her were mixed up with ice and snow. Sometimes it was like she was
out in Switzerland and all the mountains were covered with snow and she was skating on cold, greenish-colored ice. (77)

Later, she lies in bed planning how she would live in a foreign house where in the winter it would snow. Maybe in a little Switzerland town with the high glaciers and the mountains all around... Or in the foreign country of Norway by the gray winter ocean. (186)

When her friend Harry describes the Gulf of Mexico to her, Mick says

"Snow... That's what I want to see. Cold, white drifts of snow like in pictures. Blizzards. White, cold snow that keeps falling soft and falls on and on and on through all the winter. Snow like in Alaska." (209)

When she grew tired of the children who surrounded her, she "would go to the library and look at pictures in the National Geographic. Photographs of all the foreign places in the world. Paris, France. And big ice glaciers. And the wild jungles in Africa" (127).

Mick's sense of being an outcast is so complete that most of her thoughts are of faraway places or of the foreign quality of the music she loves. Her love for the music of Beethoven and Mozart is coupled with her adulation of all that is "foreign." She learns that Mozart "spoke in a foreign language and lived in a foreign place--like she
wanted to do" (92). And when she becomes a world-famous composer, she plans to conduct a symphony performing her own pieces in "New York City or else in a foreign country" (184).

Frankie has a similar attraction to faraway places, particularly those associated with cold. Thinking about how "the world seemed somehow separate from herself," she knows "she ought to leave the town and go to some place far away" (28). Her hometown, in which she had been content as a child, is no longer a place she feels a part of. "Every day," McCullers writes, "she wanted more and more to leave the town: to light out for South America or Hollywood or New York City" (30).

At first, Frankie's desire to escape involves no specific destination. Names of places--"China, Peachville, New Zealand, Paris, Cincinnati, Rome" (44)--spin in her mind. But gradually she comes to look northward for her deliverance from the disconnectedness she feels. Her brother, who is in the military, has been stationed in Alaska, where most of her ice and snow dreams take place:

She dreamed of Alaska. She walked up a cold white hill and looked on a snowy wasteland far below. She watched the sun make colors in the ice, and heard dream voices, saw dream things. And everywhere there was the cold white gentle snow. (13)

That summer she writes "very cold shows--shows about
Esquimaux and frozen explorers" (48).

Frankie begins to associate a feeling of belonging with cold, snowy places. Berenice, the cook, tells her of the happy time she spent with her first husband in Cincinnati, where she saw plenty of snow. Frankie finds it meaningful that her brother Jarvis, who has been living in Alaska, is engaged to a young woman in a town named "Winter Hill." Thus, Frankie comes to feel that the isolation she has felt in her small Southern town can be remedied by a move north. She decides that, in Jarvis and Janice, she will find the "we of me" she repeatedly refers to, the sense of belonging she desires, and she dreams of the places she will go once her brother and his bride-to-be are married and she can join them:

she suddenly saw the three of them . . . walking beneath a cold Alaskan sky, along the sea where green ice waves lay frozen and folded on the shore; they climbed a sunny glacier shot through with pale cold colors and a rope tied the three of them together . . . (86)

Frankie envisions the three of them in "Alaska, China, Iceland, South America. Traveling on trains. Letting her rip on motorcycles. Flying around all over the world in aeroplanes" (141).

Most importantly, Frankie sees her escape from her hometown as an opportunity for her to finally be a member of groups even more significant than the one from which she
has been excluded. She declares that she, her brother, and his bride “will belong to so many clubs that we can’t even keep track of all of them. We will be members of the whole world” (142).

Though neither Mick nor Frankie makes it North, or outside her hometown, for any length of time, each becomes disillusioned with her plans for escape and comes to accept the restrictions of being a woman in a small Southern town. A series of events forces Mick’s transformation from girl to young woman. When her party turns into a childish battle, she finds her high heels impair her ability to jump and run, and she ends up ruining her beautiful outfit. Deciding she is too old for such rambunctious play, she declares that she will no longer dress like a boy, and Westling suggests that “[w]ith her renunciation of these clothes, she renounces childhood and its boyish freedom” (“Carson McCullers’s Tomboys” 344). Her sexual initiation with Harry Minowitz brings her to a devastating realization of what adulthood involves and further separates her from her dreams, which seem increasingly childish as reality edges in:

Now she could not stay in the inside room. She had to be around somebody all the time. Doing something every minute. . . . Maybe she would try to think a long way ahead to the time when she would go north and see snow, or even travel in a foreign land. But these thoughts about good
things wouldn't last. . . . the snow and the foreign land were a long, long time away. Then what was there? (233)

Finally, Mick is compelled to quit school and take a job at the ten-cent store to help out her family. With this step, she leaves her childhood, her music, and her dreams of escape behind:

But now no music was in her mind. . . . It was like she was shut out from the inside room. Sometimes a quick little tune would come and go--but she never went into the inside room with music like she used to. . . . When she used to come home from school she felt good and was ready to start working on the music. But now she was always too tired. . . . 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. (269)

Mick's transformation cannot be seen as a positive one, for in becoming a young lady she loses her true self--the boyish habits Biff Brannon found so endearing, the high ambitions, the affinity for music. In exchange for her "rough and childish ways," she acquires "something lady-like and delicate . . . that was hard to point out" (272).

A sexual initiation of sorts is also part of the transformation process for Frankie. The soldier she meets at the Blue Moon takes her up to a room and attempts to
seduce her, but she knocks him out with a pitcher and escapes. This encounter forces her to recognize the sexual implications of being a woman and paves the way for the realization to come when she tries to join her brother and his bride on their honeymoon. When they refuse to allow her to accompany them, Frankie's dreams disintegrate.

When Frankie runs away from home after the wedding, it is evident that she has abandoned her childhood dreams. The police officer who finds her asks where she had planned to run to, and she carefully avoids naming her "child plans" of going to be in the movies or to join the Marines. Instead, she "named the littlest, ugliest place she knew" (188)--a town called Flowering Branch--thereby symbolically trading her exciting childhood dreams for sensible adulthood. At the end of the book, the artistic, unconventional Frankie has become Frances, a rather average silly teenager. And her transformation is no more attractive than Mick's. Caught up in her friendship with another silly teenager, she practically forgets her faithful companion John Henry, who lies dying of meningitis, and abandons her playwriting and painting for sentimental, unimaginative discussions of Michelangelo and Tennyson.

Obviously, for McCullers, the acceptance of womanhood means the rejection of art and ambition. That rejection is one which the Southern female can avoid only by escaping the confines of her society, but the outcomes of
McCullers's novels suggest that such escape is impossible. The "excruciating pain" these adolescents discover is, says Presley, "the result of their having been placed on an arid spiritual desert where youthful dreams and tender sentiments evaporate with the dawning of adulthood" (27). In such a "desert," conformity or physical escape are the only options for misfits like Mick and Frankie.
Chapter III
Flannery O'Connor's Southern "Interlekchuls"

The nature of Flannery O'Connor's fiction is amenable to and, in fact, requires the use of misfits. Because of her strong religious convictions as a Catholic, O'Connor gives her work a theological base and sets out in her fiction, as her essay "The Church and the Fiction Writer" suggests, to "reveal mysteries" to an often "hostile audience" (808). Her favorite device for dealing with such an audience is the use of the misfit or grotesque character, whose shortcomings and spiritual emptiness could hardly be overlooked even by the most "hostile" secular reader. In "The Fiction Writer and His Country," O'Connor states, "My own feeling is that writers who see by the light of their Christian faith will have . . . the sharpest eyes for the grotesque, for the perverse, and for the unacceptable" (805). Similarly, she relates the tendency toward the grotesque in Southern fiction to the South's immersion in Christianity:

To be able to recognize a freak, you have to have some conception of the whole man, and in the South the general conception of man is still, in the main, theological. ("Some Aspects of the
Furthermore, O'Connor seems to suggest that Christian writers who wish to reach unbelieving audiences often must rely on grotesque and even violent elements. What the Christian writer still recognizes as evil, his modern, secular audience has come to accept or even embrace. O'Connor argues that the "distortions" of modern life which are repugnant to the Christian writer must be made to "appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural" ("The Fiction Writer and His Country" 805) - hence, O'Connor's army of misfits and displaced persons. One finds, in her fiction, criminals on society's fringe (The Misfit in "A Good Man is Hard to Find"), refugees who are geographically displaced (Mr. Guizac in "The Displaced Person"), belles of the Old South who are historically displaced (Julian's mother in "Everything that Rises Must Converge" and the grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find"), people with physical abnormalities (Hulga with her artificial leg in "Good Country People" and Tom T. Shiftlet with his one arm in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own"), and the sterile intellectuals -- or "interlekchuls," as O'Connor labeled them ("Letters" 1206) -- the misfits which are perhaps O'Connor's most comic and pathetic.

While her Christian beliefs certainly played a role in her choosing to portray characters whose misfit qualities represent their spiritual isolation, O'Connor's own isolation and uniqueness cannot be ignored in the search for
clues to an understanding of her attraction to the misfit. O'Connor herself sought to deny the isolation of the Southern writer from his community; in "The Catholic Novelist in the South," she writes that Southern writers are not alienated from their society. They are not lonely, suffering artists gasping for purer air. Although there are a few always who run from the South as from the plague, in general the Southern writer feels the need of expatriation less than other writers in this country.

(856)

But observations of O'Connor in and outside her Southern hometown and O'Connor's own letters defy that assertion. O'Connor left Georgia to work on a master's degree in Iowa and later lived and wrote in New York and Connecticut; her permanent return to Georgia was not chosen but was forced by the onset of lupus, an incurable disease which killed her father and left O'Connor in need of constant care from her mother. In a letter to Cecil Dawkins, O'Connor admits her own early "need of expatriation" but also acknowledges a fondness for home:

I stayed away [from the South] from the time I was 20 until I was 25 with the notion that the life of my writing depended on my staying away. I would certainly have persisted in that delusion had I not got very ill and had to come home. The best of my writing has been done here.
Though O'Connor accepted that her fatal illness would force her to live in Georgia with her mother the rest of her life and by all indications grew to be content there, one is inclined to agree with Martha Stephens when she proposes that O'Connor must have felt herself trapped (for she had not chosen, when she had the choice to make, to make her life in Georgia) in her mother's care and in the outrageous sweetness of Milledgeville society. (151)

Despite her acceptance of her fate to live in Milledgeville, Georgia, O'Connor was a misfit there of her own volition. Her letters' derisive references to the society ladies of Milledgeville indicate her own outsider status—a status she probably adopted more by choice than by exclusion, especially after she became well-known.

O'Connor's own experience growing up in Georgia was undoubtedly that of a misfit. It is perhaps unwise to look to an author's life for parallels in her work, but O'Connor herself often made such comparisons in letters to friends, describing Hulga in "Good Country People" as "a projection of myself into . . . tragic-comic action" ("Letters" 959) and admitting that "Hulga is like me. So is Nelson, so is Haze, so is Enoch . . ." (1000).

The fact that O'Connor was a devout Catholic in the Protestant South is one obvious and oft-noted instance of her "outsider" status. O'Connor was aware that her
Catholicism prevented her from being a part of the mainstream culture in the South: she writes,

> What the Southern Catholic writer is apt to find, when he descends within his imagination, is not Catholic life but the life of this region in which he is both native and alien. (Mystery and Manners 197)

Living as a Catholic in the Protestant South, O'Connor was able to use her own fusion of "native and alien" sensibilities in writing fiction. As is obvious from a reading of her works, she had close contact with people like the ones in her fiction—she could not have written their delightfully accurate dialogue and mannerisms had she not been, to some degree, a part of their community. Yet, at the same time, her difference as a Catholic provided a distance from that community, a perspective that enabled her to see the incongruities of the dominant culture around her.

Some critics, as well as friends and acquaintances of O'Connor, have suggested that she was a purposeful misfit who, like many of her characters, fought, with a scowling expression, the accepted standards of Southern society. According to Louise Westling, O'Connor "refused to be lady-like, deliberately accentuating clumsy physical traits much as her character Joy-Hulga Hopewell does in 'Good Country People'" (Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens 49). Many of O'Connor's acquaintances have noted physical and behavioral similarities between O'Connor and her misfit characters,
and O'Connor herself often made such comparisons in letters to friends, likening her attitude as a young person to Mary Grace's in "Revelation" and her attire (an old sweat shirt with a bulldog embossed on it) to Hulga's embossed cowboy sweat shirt in "Good Country People." Besides her sometimes unladylike physical appearance, O'Connor was a misfit intellectually as well. In letters to friends, she "jokingly" laments the unavailability of people with whom she can have intellectually stimulating conversation in Milledgeville, "where all is culture, graciousness, refinement and bidnis-like common sense" ("Letters" 1027).

Perhaps because of her own feelings of alienation in the South, O'Connor treated her misfits and "displaced persons" with genuine, unsentimental understanding, while exposing the self-deceptions that alienated them from themselves, others, and, most important, God. O'Connor does not allow her personal kinship to her misfits to prevent her from serving her highest purpose of showing people's spiritual isolation or lack of spiritual insight.

One of O'Connor's most prevalent misfits is the ineffective intellectual who "believes in nothing" and looks down on the folks back home. O'Connor's satire was often pointed at intellectuals, whom she showed to be capable of little real understanding of their true selves, despite their educations. These intellectuals feel alienated in their Southern hometowns because their interests and attitudes differ greatly from those of the people around them.
They are educated, often "up North," and, as a result, feel superior to the "good country people" back home. But clearly something is amiss with many of these educated young people, for they live at home with their mothers in spite of their voiced or silent disdain for the South and its lack of culture.

Hulga, in "Good Country People," is perhaps O'Connor's most absurd intellectual. Having gotten a Ph.D. in philosophy, Hulga relies completely on her mind. Her intellectualility, like her wooden leg, makes her "different" from young women like Glynese and Carramae, the daughters of Mrs. Freeman, who, along with her husband, works on Hulga's mother's farm. Glynese and Carramae--whom Hulga calls Glycerin and Caramel--provide a sharp contrast with the intellectual Hulga. While they are involved in the "normal" activities of courting, marrying, and giving birth, Hulga sits all day "on her neck in a deep chair, reading" (268).

O'Connor demonstrates Hulga's difference through her mother, Mrs. Hopewell, who "thought it was nice for girls to go to school to have a good time but Joy [Hulga] had 'gone through'" (267-8). The intellectual bent which alienated Joy/Hulga from her family and neighbors and which prompted her to "go through" college continues to separate her from her community: "It seemed to Mrs. Hopewell that every year [Joy/Hulga] grew less like other people and more
like herself--bloated, rude, and squint-eyed" (268).

Recognizing her own uniqueness, Hulga glorifies in her role and takes every opportunity to impose her individuality upon anyone within reach. She stomps about the house, making as much noise as possible with her wooden leg and wearing a scowling expression; she wears the most ludicrous outfits she can concoct--"a six-year-old skirt and a yellow sweatshirt with a faded cowboy on a horse embossed on it" (268); and she chooses the name Hulga for herself, seeing it as her "highest creative act" (267).

Hulga's feeling of uniqueness is accompanied by a feeling of superiority over those around her. One outlet for her outrage at the inane conversations of her mother and Mrs. Freeman and at her mother's incessant use of cliches--"Nothing is perfect . . . that is life . . . well, other people have their opinions too" (264)--is to "stare just a little to the side of her, her eyes icy blue, with the look of someone who has achieved blindness by an act of will and means to keep it" (265). Hulga's disdain is directed not only at her mother and Mrs. Freeman, but also toward anyone of whom her mother and other less intelligent folk might approve. "She looked at nice young men," O'Connor writes, "as if she could smell their stupidity" (268). In fact, she sees her meeting with the "salt of the earth" Bible salesman, Manley Pointer, as an opportunity to demonstrate how "[t]rue genius can get an idea across even to an inferior mind" (276).
One would expect, considering her perceived intellectual and cultural superiority, that Hulga would wish to escape her provincial Southern town for a more suitable environment. A weak heart is Hulga's excuse for not leaving home. Indeed, she had made it plain that if it had not been for this condition, she would be far from these red hills and good country people. She would be in a university lecturing to people who knew what she was talking about. (268)

But Hulga's comeuppance at the end of the story convinces the reader—and probably Hulga too—that her real problem is not a weak heart (or a wooden leg or an intellectual bent) but self-delusion. In this way, O'Connor exposes the foolishness of intellectuality as a substitute for spirituality. As O'Connor said in a letter to a friend, for Hulga, "purity has been over-ridden by pride of intellect through her fine education," but, in the end, Hulga comes to realize that "she ain't so smart" ("Letters" 1000).

Hulga's revelation is effected by the Bible salesman who comes to her house. Thinking she will seduce the presumably pious young man and thereby bring him "a kind of salvation" from his belief in God, she is instead the one being seduced. He manages to pinpoint the thing about which she is most proud—her uniqueness. In trying to convince her to remove her artificial leg, he tells her, "'it's what makes you different. You ain't like anybody
else'" (281). Hulga, who feels a deep pride in her "misfit" qualities, the things that make her "different," thinks that "[t]his boy, with an instinct that came from beyond wisdom, had touched the truth about her" (281). But when he leaves with her wooden leg, she is left to contemplate the inadequacy of the intellect.

Mary Grace in the story, "Revelation," is much like Hulga. She too is educated; she attends Wellesley College "way up north" in Massachusetts. Home for the summer, she sits in the doctor's office waiting room, reading a psychology textbook. Her mother, like Hulga's, shows concern over her constant studying at the expense of having fun: she explains to Mrs. Turpin, the main character of the story, that "in the summer [Mary Grace] just keeps right on studying. Just reads all the time, a real book worm . . . I think she ought to get out and have fun" (643). "Having fun," not studying, is obviously perceived as normal in her society for girls her age, and Mary Grace's sensitivity to her mother and Mrs. Turpin's discussions of social issues and people indicates that she sees herself as a misfit.

Every comment made by the people in the waiting room is greeted by either a smirk, an ugly face, or an expression of rage from Mary Grace, who, with some just cause, considers them all dimwits. Their typically Southern opinions on the place of blacks in society and the importance of a good disposition--and especially Mrs. Turpin's
air of self-approval—prove to be more than Mary Grace can endure. She throws her book at Mrs. Turpin, attacks her, and then whispers in a low, clear voice, "'Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog'" (646).

While Mary Grace's characteristics and apparent desire to escape her hometown are like those of other intellectuals in O'Connor's fiction, she is, as John R. May notes in *The Pruning Word: The Parables of Flannery O'Connor*, "unique in Flannery O'Connor's world where intellectuals are typically judged by others, rather than the one judging" (114). The "revelation" in the story comes not to the intellectual as it does in many of O'Connor's other stories: instead, the "revelation" comes through the intellectual to another character, Mrs. Turpin, whose self-delusions have blinded her to the truth about herself, others, and God.

While the enraged intellectual daughters in O'Connor's fiction are hopeless misfits with wooden legs, bad hearts, acne, excess weight, and ridiculous clothing, educated sons in O'Connor's fiction, as Louise Westling observes, "grew up to be intellectual drones who live at home, sullenly resentful of their mothers but unable to break away" (Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens 146). Like the daughters, they look down on the narrow-minded, uneducated "home folks" but continue to remain among their "inferiors." And their mothers, like Hulga's and Mary Grace's, exasperate
them with their cheerful, cliche-ridden ideologies and their Old South attitudes.

Wesley May in "Greenleaf" is a minor character who fits perfectly into the pattern of the intellectual son. Comically demonstrating how intellectual interests are viewed as abnormal in Southern society, O'Connor writes that Wesley "had had rheumatic fever when he was seven and Mrs. May thought that this was what had caused him to be an intellectual" (504). Wesley makes his disdain for his mother, his hometown, and its ways apparent, and, like the other mothers of intellectuals in O'Connor's fiction, Mrs. May is concerned about Wesley's misfit role: "Wesley caused her real anxiety. He was thin and nervous and bald and being an intellectual was a terrible strain on his disposition" (509). Like Hulga, who "didn't like dogs or cats or birds or flowers or nature or nice young men" ("Good Country People" 268), Wesley "didn't like nice girls. He didn't like anything" ("Greenleaf" 509).

Also characteristic of an O'Connor intellectual, Wesley develops a means of obliterating from his consciousness whatever he finds annoying and banal. When his mother reminded him that he could not live away from home and maintain his salt-free diet, Wesley "would turn himself roughly around in his chair and ignore her" (509).

Wesley's behavior toward his mother suggests that he is unhappy at home and longs to escape his mother's farm and the "second-rate university" attended by "morons" (509).
where he teaches. Writes O'Connor,

He hated the country and he hated the life he lived; he hated living with his mother and his idiot brother and he hated hearing about the damn dairy and the damn help and the damn broken machinery. But in spite of all he said, he never made any move to leave. He talked about Paris and Rome but he never even went to Atlanta.

(509)
The ties of security and familiarity binding Wesley to his homeplace and his dependence upon his mother are stronger than he cares to admit.

In "Everything that Rises Must Converge," Julian is the college-educated son living at home with his mother, who "had struggled fiercely to feed and clothe and put him through school and who was supporting him still, 'until he got on his feet'" (485). His only belief is in his own mind, and he is proud of what he regards as his ability to see clearly in spite of his circumstances:

The . . . irony . . . was that in spite of [his mother], he had turned out so well. In spite of going to only a third-rate college, he had, on his own initiative, come out with a first-rate education; in spite of growing up dominated by a small mind, he had ended up with a large one; in spite of all her foolish views, he was free of
prejudice and unafraid to face facts. (492)

Obviously, Julian has a sense of superiority and looks disdainfully at those, like his mother, who do not possess his higher understanding. He is particularly proud of his attitude toward blacks. Living in the South, he is accustomed to prejudice toward blacks, and scenes such as the ones he sees on the bus with his mother serve to reinforce his belief in his intellectual superiority to the white Southerners around him; O'Connor writes,

It gave him a certain satisfaction to see injustice in daily operation. It confirmed his view that with a few exceptions there was no one worth knowing within a radius of three hundred miles.

(492)

Julian's low opinion of the South and its people is apparently not enough to make him leave, however. Though there may be no intelligence to be found for three hundred miles, Julian remains in the security of the South. He escapes his mother's inane chatter in the manner of O'Connor's other intellectuals--by sealing himself off mentally:

Behind the newspaper Julian was withdrawing into the inner compartment of his mind where he spent most of his time. This was a kind of mental bubble in which he established himself when he could not bear to be a part of what was going on around him . . . It was the only place where he
felt free of the general idiocy of his fellows.

(491)

Like his counterparts in other O'Connor stories, Julian is proud that he is "different," and only through violent revelation is he able to see the folly of that pride and to recognize that what he has regarded as beneath him in his mother and the South in general is in many ways exemplary. After Julian's mother is attacked by the black woman from the bus, she asks for Caroline, the black nurse who raised her, and Julian realizes that the relationship of his mother and her black nurse, imperfect though it was, was at least a genuine personal relationship and not merely an intellectual decision to relate. As Preston M. Browning comments,

Julian wants to be different, and since everything about the South which affronts his sense of decency and decorum is symbolized by his mother, Julian wants especially to be different from his mother . . . But Julian's relation to his mother, like his relation to the South itself, is less unambiguous than he would like to imagine. What he thinks he detests he also loves and longs for. What he believes he is totally free of, he is, in fact, fearfully dependent upon. (101)

The mind, so exalted by intellectuals like Julian, proves again to be insufficient--and misleading--in matters that should involve the heart.
The would-be writer, Asbury, in "The Enduring Chill" is the most pointedly dissatisfied intellectual in O'Connor's short fiction. He acts on his desire to escape the South, but he returns home, where he too receives his revelation.

Asbury left the South for New York City where he hoped to become a writer. His mother, Mrs. Fox, attributes his inability to fit in at home to his "being smart" and having an "artistic temperament" (551). Like most provincial Southerners, she finds such intellectual interests perplexing: "She supposed the truth was that she simply didn't understand how it felt to be sensitive or how peculiar you were when you were an artist" (552). Clearly, she sees interests in matters of the society in which she lives as indicative of normalcy. She contrasts Asbury's temperament with that of his father, "who was a lawyer and businessman and farmer and politician all rolled into one" (551)--the ideal Southern male. Her opinion of education is contemptuous; though she put both her children "through college and beyond," she observed that "the more education they got, the less they could do. Their father had gone to a one-room schoolhouse through the eighth grade and he could do anything" (551).

For Asbury, escape from the South was, he thought, the salvation of his intellect and artistic talent. On a visit to his dismal New York apartment, his mother commented that
he "wouldn't live like this at home," to which he had re-plied "with an ecstatic look" that "'no . . . it wouldn't
be possible!" (552). Asbury's attachment to his new place
was so complete that upon a visit home he found "[t]he in-
sufferableness of life at home had overcome him and he had
returned to New York two days early" (560).

Asbury's own sense of superiority is tied up with not
only his intelligence but also his stint in the city. On
what he thinks is his visit home to die, Asbury resists his
mother's attempts to get him to see Doctor Block, assuring
her that there are "better doctors in New York" (549) to
whom he could have gone. When Block does come to examine
him, Asbury haughtily tells the doctor, "'What's wrong with
me is way beyond you'" (557). Block's opinion of the North
places him in the majority in the South: he tells Asbury,
"'I went up there once myself . . . and saw exactly how
little they had and came straight on back home'" (556).

In New York, convinced that he was dying, Asbury com-
posed a long letter to his mother explaining his desire to
leave and his inability to achieve the goals for which he
left:

"I came here to escape the slave's atmosphere of
home," he had written, "to find freedom, to lib-
erate my imagination, to take it like a hawk from
its cage and set it 'whirling off into the widen-
ing gyre' (Yeats) and what did I find? It was
incapable of flight. It was some bird you had
domesticated, sitting huffy in its pen, refusing to come out!" (554)

Escape to the North could be physically but not spiritually realized. Even in the North, he felt his mother's influence as strongly as ever: "Her way had simply been the air he breathed and when at last he had found other air, he couldn't survive in it" (554-5).

Once back in the South, Asbury again feels alienated from people who might share his intellectual interests. His mother, sensing that he needs to "talk about subjects that were of interest to him" (560), broaches the subject of his writing, saying "'it would be nice if you wrote a book about down here. We need another good book like Gone With the Wind'" (560) and adding that he should put the war in it to make the book long. Asbury's response to his mother's vacuous attempt at conversation he could enjoy is to "put his head back gently as if he were afraid it would crack" (560). Realizing that she cannot provide the intellectual conversation which he needs, she suggests to him that she might ask a retired Methodist minister to see him: "'You'd enjoy him. He collects rare coins'" (561).

Remembering the Jesuit priest with the "taciturn superior expression" (550) he met in New York, Asbury proposes that his mother invite a Jesuit priest to visit him. He believes that finally he will have the opportunity to talk with someone well-educated, someone who "'would be able to discuss something besides the weather'" (561). His
disgust for the South's cultural sterility is made clear: he thinks that with the arrival of the Jesuit priest, "[h]e would talk to a man of culture before he died--even in this desert!" (561).

But Asbury's intellectual superiority is turned on him, in true O'Connor fashion. Grateful that the priest has come, Asbury tells him, "'There's no one here an intelligent person can talk to'" (565). When Asbury asks the priest what he thinks of Joyce, the priest answers, "'Joyce? Joyce who?'" (565). Asbury explains that he meant James Joyce, but in reply, "[t]he priest brushed his huge hand in the air as if he were bothered by gnats. 'I haven't met him,' he said. 'Now. Do you say your morning and night prayers?"' (565).

In the end, Asbury recognizes that though the people around him may be intellectually and culturally sterile, his reliance upon the mind has made him spiritually sterile. Doctor Block, whom Asbury had regarded as intellectually inadequate, discovers the cause of Asbury's illness--non-fatal undulant fever from drinking unpasteurized milk. Asbury, like so many other O'Connor intellectuals, is forced to realize that his attitude of superiority over his fellow Southerners is unfounded and that the shortcomings of the South which he sought to escape are, in fact, no worse than his own shortcomings.

Most of O'Connor's intellectuals are forced to retract their beliefs in their own superiority and their
unfavorable views of the South. Indeed, all the pathos of
the isolated misfit languishing in the South, dreaming of
an escape North--such as one finds in Carson McCullers's
work--is inverted by O'Connor. O'Connor does not allow her
identification with her misfit characters to prevent her
from recognizing their self-delusion. Rather than present
her misfits as pathetic, hopeless, trapped creatures,
O'Connor looks at them straight-on, without blinders, and
sees that escape from their region is not their greatest
need. What O'Connor's intellectual characters need is
greater self-awareness.
Misfits in American literature hail from every region of the country, but the misfit in the South is faced with a special dilemma. Every Southerner is shaped by the values and traditions of the South, and he is separated from the rest of the country through the dialect, values, attitudes, and mores the region imprints upon him. At the same time, the Southern misfit hates the restrictions of the South and feels alienated from other Southerners because he cannot accept their standards. Thus, unlike the American misfit who can go elsewhere and find his place, the Southern misfit is haunted by the South and his own Southern-ness, by the South's beauty and uniqueness and past.

But the Southern misfit and the dream of escape take on added complexity in the hands of writers like Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor. The two actually seem to be at opposite poles in their attitudes toward the individual's alienation in the South. McCullers is more willing to blame the misfit's alienation on the South, or at least on outside factors. She suggests that Southern misfits, like Mick and Frankie, are misfits because the South as a society refuses to acknowledge artistic talent, ambition in females, or any behavior that is not the norm in that
society.

The second theme, the dream of escape, in McCullers's hands becomes a hopeless desire. She reinforces the misfit's pathetic state by not allowing her to achieve the goals that her region has refused her. In this way, McCullers achieves a most personal, sympathetic portrayal of Southern misfits.

Conversely, O'Connor sees Southern society as only part of the misfit's problem, if it is a problem at all. To her, the misfit is alienated because of his lack of self-knowledge and his refusal to see his own shortcomings. Even though O'Connor, with her degrees and published works, was herself something of a misfit in Southern society, she does not allow her Southern intellectuals as sympathetic a rendering as McCullers gives her artistic Southern girls. Rather, she seems, in much of her fiction, to be proving to her earlier self, who moved away because she thought she could not write in the South, that such excuses are self-deluding and that what one might see as restrictions placed by society are actually restrictions the individual places on himself out of fear of failure. For O'Connor's intellectuals, the dream of escaping the South is often replaced by a realization that they themselves, and not their region, are the source of their alienation.

Other Southern writers have approached the Southern misfit's dilemma in manners as diverse as the writers themselves--Thomas Wolfe's Eugene Gant sought intellectual and
artistic fulfillment in New York City; William Faulkner's Quentin Compson physically escaped the South for Harvard but never escaped the region spiritually; Alice Walker's Grange Copeland left the oppression and racism of the South only to return to that region in his old age. The Southern misfit is not easy to define, for his experience is different for each writer, yet he obviously exists in some form for many major Southern writers—and perhaps most memorably in the works of two very different Georgia women, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor.
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