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## Speech, Silence and Female Adolescence in Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop*.

By Catherine Martin<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between adolescent female characters and silence in Carson McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and Angela Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1967). The established body of criticism focussing on McCullers' and Carter's depictions of the female grotesque provides the theoretical framework for this paper, as I explore the implications of these ideas when applied to language and speech. In a white Western society, where a woman's sexuality, appetite and articulation are controlled and suppressed, this paper asks: what options for expression are there, for women whose speech is always limited to their body, and whose body always speaks alterity and abjection to male interpretation?

Mute characters and their relationships with the female protagonists of these two novels open up my discussion of disembodiment, silence, and the appropriation of male-dominated cultural history in the aid of female articulation. Ultimately I discuss the ways in which these two writers explore the extent to which women can 'speak for themselves', by working within and against existing social and cultural models of womanhood.

*Keywords* Silence, representation, female adolescence, the body

### Introduction

'They said I'd been reading too much Carson McCullers.'  
(Carter qtd. in Haffenden 1985:80).

This is how Angela Carter summarizes the critical response to her first novel, *Shadow Dance*, published in 1966. The comparison to Carson McCullers is one that lasted throughout Carter's career, re-emerging for example in Margaret Atwood's review of the posthumously published *Burning Your Boats* (1995): "ghostly godpersons gathered round her typewriter [...] Carson McCullers, and a whole gaggle of disreputable tale-telling old grannies" (2005:152). But one cannot avoid the derogatory connotations suggested by this opening quotation. How can you read 'too much' Carson McCullers, and why is this a bad thing? What is being implied here about McCullers' writing in particular, and women's writing and reading in general?

This quotation provides a pertinent opening for my paper, which discusses the ways in which discourses surrounding femininity, the body and language intersect in the work of Carson McCullers and Angela Carter. In the above quotation, Carter's relationship to language is mapped onto the body, as she is imagined consuming — over-

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was originally written as an undergraduate dissertation completed in 2008, under the supervision of Dr. Jo Gill at the University of Exeter.

indulging in — McCullers' prose.<sup>2</sup> Correspondingly, critics were “*reluctant to concede that there had ever been anything more than a lot of high-falutin bluster in [her] earlier work*” (Haffenden, 1985:81); an image which relates Carter's excessive literary consumption to the production of bloated ‘bluster’.

The metaphors of appetite and emission used to describe Carter's writing evoke the image, deeply ingrained in Western patriarchal culture, of the female body as unruly and grotesque. This image is grounded in Biblical authority, as Eve — the ‘blueprint’ for womankind — is defined by her unchecked appetite for the forbidden fruit. As Luce Irigaray has argued, excessive appetite is a common metaphor for female sexuality, which is “*often interpreted, and feared, as a sort of insatiable hunger, a voracity that will swallow you whole*” (1985:29)<sup>3</sup>. This overlapping between women's digestive and sexual appetites is apparent in Eve's story; when she succumbs to the temptation of the phallic serpent, the resulting punishment is childbirth.

Women are also silenced as a result of Eve's sin: “*I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence [...] the woman being deceived was in the transgression*” (I Timothy 2:12-14). Thus for women, the themes of appetite, sexuality and speech coincide. As Thomas Laqueur explains in *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (2003), the young woman who reads ‘too much’, has historically been regarded as “*the misguided reader par excellence [...] the perfect onanist*” (340). Women's bodies, speech and sexuality are tied to notions of excess and punishment, suggesting that they are sinful and ultimately threatening. Therefore in the history of Western patriarchal culture, women have been denied the same means of expression as men and their voices have been suppressed by a cultural tradition that denies their significance. To Julia Kristeva, this makes “*woman [...] that which cannot be represented, that which is not spoken, that which remains outside naming*” (qtd. in Moi 2002:162), locating womanhood outside the borders of a language dominated by men.

In my reading of McCullers' *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and Carter's *The Magic Toyshop* (1968), I focus on the female adolescent as a figure on the threshold of adult womanhood and sexuality. I look at the ways in which McCullers and Carter represent the female adolescent's relationship to her body and to language; themes that are related by notions of the abject and grotesque.

In ‘Revisiting the Southern Grotesque: Mikhail Bakhtin and the Case of Carson McCullers’ (2001), Sarah Gleeson-White applies Bakhtin's model of the grotesque — as defined in *Rabelais and His World* (1968) — to two of McCullers' female adolescent characters: Mick Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). Gleeson-White draws on Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque* (1995), in which the author states that the ‘positioning of the grotesque — as superficial and to the margins — is suggestive of a certain construction of the feminine’ (5), arguing that the adolescent female body epitomises the ‘open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing’ body of the Bakhtinian grotesque as described by Russo (1995:8). Whilst the ‘classic’ female body, whose boundaries have been sanitised

<sup>2</sup> Appetite metaphors are frequently used in Carter criticism, as Becky Munford points out in ‘Angela Carter and the Politics of Intertextuality’: “*the vampire [...] becomes a metaphor for her textual practice*” (2006:2).

<sup>3</sup> An idea epitomised by the vagina dentata — a vagina with teeth — capable of castrating men and thus a deep-seated fear arising in many cultures.

by the male gaze, has a closed, impenetrable surface, the body of the female adolescent is penetrable, growing, developing breasts and hips, and beginning to menstruate. As a body that ‘does not respect borders, positions, rules’ but represents ‘the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’, the body of the female adolescent fulfils Julia Kristeva’s definition of the abject (*Powers of Horror* 1982:4), and as such becomes a target for social control. Gleeson-White understands McCullers’ representation of grotesque female adolescence as a celebration of possibility and transformation in the face of attempts to contain and sanitise it.

This paper will build on Gleeson-White’s essay, using the linguistic theories of Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray to extend the discussion to the themes of language and silence in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *The Magic Toyshop*. For as Russo points out, “*the new bodily canon extends to codes of speech*” (1995:79). Whilst the closed orifices of the classical female body suggest silence and sexual purity as feminine ideals, the grotesque body is characterised by uncensored speech and sexuality.

As Carter and McCullers’ adolescent characters approach adulthood, they are increasingly identified with the ‘dirtiness’ and excess characteristic of the grotesque. Traditionally associated with hypervisibility, the grotesque is described by Patricia Yaeger as “*a figure of speech with the volume turned up*” (2000:10). Yet in white, Western culture, the female adolescent is confronted with oppressive ideals of disembodiment and silence: “*If you want to speak “well”, you pull yourself in [...] pull yourself away from the limitless realm of your body*” (Irigaray 1985:213). That which transgresses the sanitised boundaries of the body, including the voice, must be suppressed. What then, is the significance of representing the adolescent female body — “*a culturally productive linguistic body in constant semiosis*” (Russo 1995:61) — alongside a mute?

### **Carson McCullers: *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940).**

‘Reverence cannot linger too fondly at so pure an altar [...] The Confederate woman, in her silent influence, in her eternal vigil, still abides [...] and radiant, like the morning, on her brow, is Dixie’s diadem.’

(Lucian Lamar Knight qtd. in Goodwyn Jones 1981:4).

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is Carson McCullers’ debut novel; published when she was only twenty-three years old, it caused a literary sensation and launched her career as an author of “*oddbods and adolescent girls*” (Smith 2008:4). Set in the bleak landscape of a small, unnamed town in the American South during the depression, the novel covers one year in the lives of a group of disparate individuals, who drift in and out of each other’s day-to-day existences. In the opening chapter of the novel, John Singer, a deaf-mute, is left alone after his friend Antonapoulos is sent to an asylum. In the following chapters, Singer attracts the attention and admiration of the novel’s four main characters, including Mick Kelly, a thirteen-year-old tomboy with a talent and enthusiasm for music.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The other main characters are: Biff Brannon, owner of the New York Cafe; Jake Blount, a frustrated Marxist and a drunk; and Doctor Copeland, the town’s ‘Negro doctor’ and civil rights activist.

At the novel's outset, Mick is far from being the "lady-like and delicate" example of Southern womanhood that she later becomes (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* 1940:311). Biff Brannon notices her "hoarse, boyish voice and of her habit of hitching up her khaki shorts and swaggering like a cowboy in the picture show" (23); characteristics completely at odds with the model of femininity upheld in the American South, which takes exaggerated form in 'Confederate woman'. The white Southern woman is supposed to be submissive, beautiful, physically pure, and socially dignified; ultimately conforming to the ideal of disembodied femininity. Although this ideal is most closely associated with upper class white women, its influence has, in the words of Sarah Gleeson-White, 'dominated southern gender regimes from the antebellum period right up to the present' ('A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness' 2003:47).

Traditional femininity is represented in the novel by Mick's older sister Etta and the Kelly's housekeeper Portia; both of whom subject Mick to comment and criticism. Etta dreams of being in the movies, which would enable her to earn money as well as maintain her highly-valued appearance of femininity. The Hollywood actress becomes a modern incarnation of the Confederate woman; her body and speech controlled by the male gaze, which constitutes "an attempted act of possession and ownership in which woman is given meaning" (Attwood 1998:88). She represents the extreme limit of the conditions of women in the South, whose bodies and lives were often constricted and scripted by social convention. The movie star is also subject to Etta complains that "somebody ought to clamp down on you, Mick Kelly, and make you behave", that is, behave as a grown-up woman (41). In contrast to the metaphorical clamp of Southern womanhood, Mick is growing so quickly that she threatens to exceed the acceptable limits of femininity. She feels like "a lady at the fair who was eight and a half feet tall" (101), and Portia instructs her to "quit acting so greedy" (144). As well as fuelling her growth, Mick's appetite and its suggestion of her emergent sexuality, contradicts the white Western ideal of disembodied femininity.

In contrast to the impossibly clean, white, altar-like purity of the figure wearing Dixie's diadem, Mick feels most at home in the dark, and loses her own diadem — a rhinestone tiara — when playing in the dirty streets at night (105). This is when she is free from both the restrictions of childhood and the responsibilities of adulthood, as the younger siblings that she baby-sits are now in bed. The night represents the liminality of adolescence and thus the opposite to the respectable and the known. It suggests lost innocence and the reign of unconscious drives and desire. The night is figured as a space of adventure but also danger — "Girls were scared a man would come out from somewhere and put his teapot in them like they was married" (93) — imbued with the threat of active, unlicensed sexuality.

Mick explains that she has always been infatuated with "one person after another" (50), in a chain of consecutive objects of desire. The range of people that she has loved, differing across age and gender, highlights the fluidity of Mick's sexuality. Her first sexual encounter is with boy-next-door Harry Minowitz during a trip to a creek outside the town borders. The creek is on private land — literally out of bounds — symbolising the transgressive nature of their encounter (237). It is here that Mick also swims for the first time, echoing the story of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The*

*Awakening* (1899); a novel famous for its controversial portrayal of a woman's convention-breaking sexual awakening and self-discovery.<sup>5</sup>

Mick's desire — like her growth and eating — is figured as overflowing, but it is always accompanied by a lack of speech. Whilst being aware of her attachment to certain individuals, Mick cannot define the object of her desire, and her infatuations specifically exclude communication (213). Mick reflects that “*nothing much happened that she could describe to herself in thoughts or words — but there was a feeling of change*” (89). She is unable to put the experience of her changing body and emerging sexuality into words. Instead, the night and the desire that it represents are articulated through an alternative mode of expression: “*Whenever she was in the dark she thought about music*” (93).<sup>6</sup> Mick feels that music expresses the experience of her adolescent body; listening to Beethoven she concludes: “*This was her, Mick Kelly, walking in the day-time and by herself at night*” (107). Mick creates her own music to express her desire, writing a song titled ‘This Thing I Want, I Know Not What’, for which she is unable to write lyrics.

During her sexual experience with Harry, Mick feels as if “*her head was broke off from her body and thrown away. And her eyes looked up straight into the blinding sun while she counted something in her mind*” (241). This description suggests that she is no longer a thinking subject, but a passive body, subject to the activity of others. Her sexual experience causes a violent break from comprehension and articulation. She is detached from the ‘inside room’ in her mind, the private place where she makes sense of her experiences through music (145). Instead, all she can do is count, which is linear, unemotional and mechanical. After their sexual encounter, Harry insists on trying to translate their physical experience into words. He interprets it through one of the only means available to him — the discourse of religion — concluding that they have committed ‘a terrible sin’. Mick does not speak about what has happened, except for stating baldly: “*I didn't like that*” (242).

Mick therefore identifies with Singer's inability to speak, and some critics have read his silence as a symbol of the other characters' isolation and sense of meaninglessness: “*his communication difficulties constitute the most obvious symbols of modern alienation*” (Millichap 1971:16). Each of the main characters, however, feels that within Singer's silence lies a special understanding, a point of meaning and communication. Mick asserts that “*they waited to tell each other things that had never been said before*” (212). Visiting Singer to listen to his radio and discuss her plans to become a composer, Mick associates him with her love of music, and his name links him explicitly to expression. As each of the main characters attaches their own understanding to his character, he comes to represent a multitude of meanings.

Singer is disempowered and feminised by his lack of speech, and his implied homosexuality — McCullers' suggestive representation of Singer's longing for Antonapoulos leaves their relationship open to interpretation. The two mutes occupy opposite stereotypes of femininity. Antonapoulos is defined by excessive bodily

<sup>5</sup> Mick's discovery of music parallels Edna's experiments with painting, and the hot, close atmosphere of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* also recalls Chopin's novel.

<sup>6</sup> It may be possible to link this music to Julia Kristeva's notion of the semiotic, although in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974) Kristeva defines the semiotic as non-expressive and non-signifying (2169), and I argue that the music does contain meaning for Mick.

In addition, McCullers representation of music as an alternative to patriarchal language is problematised by the fact that classical music has its own male-dominated tradition.

appetites; his large stomach sticks out in a grotesque parody of a pregnant woman's. In contrast, Singer is always calm-faced, well dressed and clean. He is associated with blankness, whiteness and purity: "*them shirts were no more dirty than if Saint John the Baptist himself had been wearing them*" (80). Singer's clean, blank character fits Patricia Yaeger's description of whiteness in American literature, which "*erupts with too much meaning; it is terrifyingly dynamic, vulnerable, agitated, tortured, vertiginous*" (2000:21). In this view, Singer's contradictory overdetermined silence does not represent the absolute limit of language, but demonstrates Michel Foucault's claim that "[t]here is not one but many silences, which can be read alongside what is spoken" (1998:27). Singer's clean, white, silent body is loaded with meaning, and is therefore analogous to the idealised and sanitised female body. Despite being a white, able-bodied and attractive man — in fact, the least 'freakish' character in the book — Singer is positioned as a feminine, blank space to be penetrated by meaning.

When, in the past, Singer attempted to speak with his mouth, he was led to believe "*that his voice must be like the sound of some animal or that there was something disgusting in his speech*" (14). Convinced that his speech is grotesque, Singer only communicates with his hands, through writing and sign language. In his discussion of 'The Realistic Structure of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*', Joseph Millichap notes that in the chapters centred on Mick, Biff, Blount and Copeland, the main character becomes "*the central intelligence*" of the section. In contrast, the chapters that deal with Singer and Antonapoulos are always narrated in the third person (1971:11). For the most part, Singer is only seen from the outside by the omniscient narrator, rather than being heard. This means that his voice is dislodged from his image — it is disembodied.

Mick's voice — located in the music she listens to and creates — is similarly disembodied. Her desires, expressed through music rather than the words of the text, remain inaccessible to the reader. Throughout McCullers' novel, the limitations of language are manifest in the characters' inability to communicate and understand each other. Yet Mick's passion for music is responsive, creative, and moving. Critic Ruth Padel writes that: "*Innards can be wounded by what comes in through sight and hearing, wounded by emotion*" (qtd. in Attwood 1998:97), and Mick describes the Beethoven symphony that she hears as "*the worst hurt there could be*" (107). Unable to put this emotion into words, she brings it back to her body, "*pounding the same muscle with all her strength until the tears came down her face*" and "*scraping rocks against her leg until it bleeds*" (108). Mick's feelings are violently inscribed on her flesh, but the injuries show a lack of respect for the image of white womanhood that Etta and Portia promote. Mick's body disrupts the process of reading and interpretation; her self-expression — her music and her desire — are linked to the grotesque body that can be penetrated, entered, and disrupted.

Mick tries to conceal her burgeoning womanhood: "*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*" (29), wishing that she could remain a child rather than become an embodied woman. After losing her virginity to Harry, she claims: "*I wasn't any kid. But now I wish I was, though*" (242). Early on in the novel, Mick plays in an empty, newly-built house. She remembers a boy standing on the roof shouting 'Friends, Romans, Countrymen', but on reaching the summit she cannot shout anything out (37). The boy uses Shakespeare's words: words taken from the male literary tradition, which express

male community and camaraderie. Shakespeare's words represent transcendence; the ability to exist beyond the material life of the body. This places in stark contrast Mick's inscription of "a very bad word" — "PUSSY" — on the inside wall of the house. However, she "did not feel really satisfied", and improves upon her work by writing "Motsart", and her stunted, genderless signature, "M.K." (37). This scene encapsulates Mick's resistance to letting her self-expression be circumscribed by the female anatomy. By articulating herself through a disembodied voice — music — Mick tries to avoid her body being read and interpreted by the male gaze.

In *Literary Women* (1976), Ellen Moers cites McCullers' work as an example of the female gothic; a genre which she identifies with women's fear of their own bodies. Mick's desire to remain a child, her attempts to hide her feminine attributes and her reliance on a disembodied voice to express her feelings seem to confirm Moers' definition. However I would argue that Mick's behaviour is less a fear of her own body, than a fear of how she will be treated and expected to behave by society once she has become a fully-grown woman, defined — and confined — by her materiality. Like Mick, *The Magic Toyshop's* Melanie has to negotiate the problems surrounding female embodiment and speech in a patriarchal culture. When Angela Carter started writing in the late 1960s, traditional conceptions of the female body were being re-evaluated by second wave feminists who sought to reclaim and rewrite the female body. Through Melanie's story, Carter engages with these contemporary debates, and explores the possibility of women's self-determination outside the discourses of patriarchal culture, which she exposes as potentially gothic in its attitudes to women.

### **Angela Carter: *The Magic Toyshop* (1967).**

'You could walk your calf past the butcher's shop for days, but it's only when he sees the abattoir that he realizes that there is a relation between himself and the butcher's shop — a relation which is mediated, shall we say, by the abattoir.'  
(Carter qtd. in Haffenden 1985:78).

*The Magic Toyshop* is the story of fifteen-year-old Melanie, starting the summer in which she discovers that she is 'made of flesh and blood' (1). Melanie's adolescent body fulfils Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque; like Mick, she is growing fast. The 'bud-wing shoulderblades' (1) that protrude from her back suggest her potential independence, and remind the reader of the breasts that are also emerging on her front. When Melanie accidentally destroys her mother's well-preserved wedding dress, the bloodstains on the white material are symbolic of menstruation. This is reinforced by the prominence of the 'red, swollen moon' (9) typically associated with the menstrual cycle.

Melanie is free to explore her developing body and sexuality in the privacy of her bedroom. Her sense of self-possession is expressed through the words of John Donne: "O, my America, my new found land" (1), demonstrating her appropriation of the language of the male gaze and colonial power. Her body is a landscape for her own private exploration, as she is "clambering her own mountain ranges, penetrating the moist richness of her secret valleys" (1). This self-discovery, suggestive of masturbation, is carried out when Melanie is supposed to be reading *Lorna Doone*. Melanie therefore

embodies the stereotypical 'misguided female reader' mentioned in my introduction, whose sexual and literary appetites are intertwined.

Experimenting with various poses in front of the mirror, Melanie appears to be free to create her own identity, but Carter problematises her protagonist's sense of power. Whilst Melanie feels 'pregnant with herself', which suggests her self-sufficient creative power, it also implies that she is becoming a maternal, reproductive woman. Melanie's conception of her body and her desire is "*constructed entirely through and by masculine representations of sexualised women*" (Mahoney 1997:78), and so the possessive male gaze lurks behind Melanie's self-discovery. Melanie performs each identity for an imaginary male voyeur, yet in reality only she has the pleasure of viewing. Melanie occupies an ambivalent position between independence from, and compliance with, patriarchal ideology.

As the reference to John Donne indicates, the way in which Melanie perceives her body is shaped by the language and discourses available to her. Melanie's frequent allusions to art, literature and film, including *Jane Eyre* (7) and *Romeo and Juliet* (9), are a marker of her middle-class education, which influences the way in which she sees herself. Melanie also has the luxury of her own room, a private space where she can study and be free from inhibition and observation. The fact that Melanie's parents can afford to travel abroad means that she has greater freedom at home, as the pillars of patriarchal authority are absent. Melanie's upbringing provides her with the privileges of her class and shelters her from the underlying realities of patriarchal conditions. Melanie unquestioningly hopes to reproduce the heteronormative family structure with which she has grown up. It is only when their parents die in a plane crash, and the children move to London to live with relatives, that Melanie's relation to male power is revealed to her, mediated by her tyrannical uncle Philip Flower.

On numerous occasions, Uncle Philip's home is compared to Bluebeard's castle, and is thus figured as a site of patriarchal authority and sexualised violence towards women (82, 146, 198).<sup>7</sup> Carter acknowledges that *The Magic Toyshop* is also an attempt to revise the story of the Fall, and hence the founding myth of patriarchy in Judeo-Christian culture (Haffenden 1985:80). By overlapping these two intertextual frameworks, Carter implies that the gothic conditions suffered by the women in Uncle Philip's household are an exaggerated version of the conditions imposed by Christian morality. Yet Carter makes a point of recognising that "*men live by the myths you've mentioned as much as women*" (Haffenden 1985:91), implying that she does not invest in social models that see 'the sexes' in opposition to each other.<sup>8</sup>

Under Philip's patriarchal authority, Aunt Margaret becomes an extreme example of women's disempowerment, ultimately realised in the disembodiment of the female subject. Throughout the novel, Margaret is described as delicate and bird-like. Whilst flight can be a metaphor for female liberation, Mary Russo problematises this idea, identifying it as a "*fantasy of a femininity which defies the limits of the body, especially the female body*" (1995:44). In relation to Margaret and Melanie, whose potential freedom is oppressed by Uncle Philip, the metaphor of transcendence is transformed into a symbol of the dehumanising and degrading effects of women's physical and vocal

<sup>7</sup> Carter rewrites the story of Bluebeard in the title story of her collection *The Bloody Chamber* (1979).

<sup>8</sup> Exclusive female community and matriarchal authority is explored and critiqued in Carter's novel *The Passion of New Eve* (1977).

oppression.<sup>9</sup> Like the stuffed, mechanised birds that Uncle Philip makes in the toyshop, which open and shut their mouths when a lever is pulled, the women's oral activity — both eating and speaking — are under Philip's control.

Margaret's mutism, which '*came to her on her wedding day, like a curse*', is a direct result of Philip's patriarchal rule (37). Her extraordinary thinness also seems to stem from Philip's domination, and combined with her silence, adds to the impression that she has practically faded away. When Uncle Philip presides over meals, Margaret is barely able to eat. On Sundays — when she and Philip are said to 'make love' (114) — Margaret wears the necklace that her husband designed for her. The sadistic pleasure that Philip takes from watching Margaret suffer under the weight of the collar suggests that his sexual impulses towards her are motivated by violence and cruelty (113). The collar makes it difficult for her to eat, and Philip's control over Margaret's appetite implies his control over her sexuality. Deprived of her appetite, her desire, and her voice, Margaret is forced to live up to the ideal of disembodied femininity.

However, the provision of food is one aspect of family life over which Margaret has control. In '*Eating the Evidence: Women, Power and Food*', Sarah Sceats highlights the political dimensions of the provision and consumption of food. She argues that for Margaret, the meals become an "*eloquent means of expression*" (1996:122), and therefore the domestic kitchen is a contested political space in the novel. Sceats refers to the Christmas dinner scene, in which Philip carves the goose: "*he saw it and plunged the carving knife into its belly so fiercely that the stuffing spurted on the best damask tablecloth*" (160). Sceats assumes that Philip might use the carving knife to attack Finn, but the sexualised description of the penetration and 'spurting' of the goose, the fact that Philip mutilates a bird (the animal associated with Aunt Margaret), and his comparison to Henry VIII (famous for executing his wives), suggests that his violence is also directed towards Margaret. The food is one of Margaret's limited means of self-expression, and as such it is resented and attacked.

Aunt Margaret's silence can be read as a refusal to speak the language of patriarchal power, and her near-starvation as a rejection of Uncle Philip's crushing authority at the dinner table. This interpretation is suggested by Melanie's belief that Margaret's mutism gives her more 'substance' (37). However, in '*The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity: A Feminist Appropriation of Foucault*', Susan Bordo discusses mutism and anorexia as "*symptoms crystallized from the language of femininity*" (1989:22). As exaggerated forms of the silence and disembodiment imposed on women by patriarchal culture, the subversive power of mutism and anorexia "*will always involve ambiguities*" (1989:22). Like Melanie's self-discovery in the opening chapters of the novel, Margaret's silence is complicated territory in terms of women's freedom and self-determination.

The longer she lives in the house, the more Melanie identifies with Margaret: "*she, too, had been put away in the same close airing-cupboard, this grey, tall house*" (138), signalling her story as one of disembodiment and disempowerment. When Melanie writes to Mrs Rundle about their first few days in the house, concealing the fact that she is very unhappy, she uses Aunt Margaret's paper, symbolising her inability to voice the

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<sup>9</sup> In *The Female Grotesque*, Russo discusses female flight in relation to Carter's *Nights at the Circus* (1984). In this later novel, Russo argues, Carter re-invents female flight as a 'bodily space of possibility and repetition' (181).

truth. Melanie's control over language diminishes, as she no longer goes to school, there are no books in Uncle Philip's house, and barely any opportunities to speak to people (115). Philip never learns Melanie's name, symbolically eliminating her subjectivity and excluding her from the realm of articulation.

In contrast to the opening pages of the novel in which she excitedly explores her changing adolescent body, Melanie becomes indifferent to, and detached from, her physical self: "*she, Melanie, was forever grey, a shadow*" (77). Melanie sees the night that she tried on the wedding dress, when she felt "*sufficient for herself in her own glory and did not need a groom*" (16), as a transgression for which she has been punished. Without the luxury of her own space, and blaming herself for her parent's death, Melanie no longer celebrates her body but punishes it, dressing plainly and tying her hair in "*tortured plaits*" (45). Melanie's alienation from her body is reinforced by Uncle Philip, who effectively turns her into a puppet by forcing her to play Leda alongside his treasured swan puppet in a private production of the Greek myth.

The story of Leda being raped by Zeus in the form of a swan represents femininity as the passive counterpart to male sexuality. Here, the bird imagery signifies male power, providing a sinister counterpoint to the flight metaphor typically used to connote female liberation. Threatened with homelessness if she does not comply, Melanie is denied any choice in the matter (148). She is robbed of all knowledge and power by Philip, who forbids her to see the swan or his script before the show, so that on stage she is completely subjected to his will. As the swan advances towards her, Melanie feels literally disembodied: "*wrenched from her own personality, watching this whole fantasy from another place*" (166). Melanie's out of body experience results from having to relinquish her body entirely to Philip's control and objectification, which deny her subjectivity and agency.

In his puppet workshop, Philip is the archetypal male creator, whose representations of femininity deny women the ability to represent themselves. The violence against women's bodies and voices that the workshop represents is made literal when Melanie experiences a hallucination of "*a freshly severed hand, all bloody at the roots*" in the kitchen drawer. The hand recalls Aunt Margaret's writing hand, and like the image of Philip attacking the goose, it signifies his destruction of female articulation in whatever form it takes. The severed hand resembles Roland Barthes' description of the 'scriptor' — his replacement for the author — whose "*hand, cut off from any voice, borne by a pure gesture of inscription, [...] traces a field without origin*" (2001:1468). The dismembered female hand suggests that for women, the idea of being 'cut off' from authorial power is associated with violence and pain rather than freedom. Lorna Sage has argued that Carter "*went in for the proliferation, rather than the death, of the author*" (qtd. in Munford 2006:10). As a feminist, Carter believed that eliminating the notion of the author prematurely forecloses the issue of agency for women (Munford 2006:10).

When Melanie imagines the severed hand, she concludes that "*Bluebeard was here*" (118) and passes out. It is this momentary loss of self that initiates Melanie as "*another woman in the house*" after which she finally feels part of the close-knit community between Margaret and her brothers, Francie and Finn (123). Melanie even sees her own hand as "*an object which did not belong to her and of which she did not know the use*" (161). This reminder of the severed hand emphasises the extent to which Melanie has become estranged from her own body and voice. Accordingly, when Finn

kisses her for the first time, Melanie feels “*a long way away from him*” (106). She is shocked when Finn puts his tongue in her mouth, because it breaks the closed body surface that she has tried to establish since living at Uncle Philip’s, and is suggestive of a further, sexual penetration. Finn searches for Melanie’s tongue, her own voice, but she has already been subdued by her sense of guilt and Philip’s authority, and at this point withdraws from the kiss.

Melanie, who has always been encouraged to keep herself scrupulously clean, is simultaneously attracted to and repulsed by Finn, who emits a “*poverty-stricken, slum smell*” (36). In *Purity and Danger* (1966), Mary Douglas explains that rituals concerning cleanliness and pollution are less about real danger than reinforcing social codes: “*rituals work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body*” (1966:159). Melanie’s cleanliness is symbolic of her virginity, supposedly preserved for her husband, and her cleaning rituals are part of the symbolic system that constructs the female body as something dirty that needs to be controlled and managed. Her desire for Finn demonstrates a desire for the Other, for the ‘dirty’ evidence of corporeality that she has attempted to eliminate. Finn informs Melanie of her own ‘dirtiness’: “*the veneer is rubbing off already*” (116), encouraging her to acknowledge her body and her desire rather than punish it. When Melanie realises that Finn’s dirtiness and hence her own, ‘no longer matters’ (149), she regains a sense of her body and desire, and wills Finn to kiss her. Melanie’s sexual pleasure is diffuse, ‘a nervous, unlocalised excitement’ (149), echoing Luce Irigaray’s assertion that “*woman has sex organs more or less everywhere [...] her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined*” (1985:28). Irigaray uses this conception of female sexuality as a model for female speech. Although Melanie’s voice is featured at this point in the narrative, it does not conform to Irigaray’s notion of ‘feminine language’. Her voice is ‘certain and distinct, inside her head’ (149), and therefore most resembles male language, which Irigaray defines as fixed, clear, and coherent (29). This suggests that Melanie is trying to articulate herself within the pre-existing structure of Symbolic language.

Since it is Uncle Philip that has engineered Melanie and Finn’s encounter, she is once again playing a part in his fantasies. Yet at the end of the novel, Philip’s authority is crushed by Margaret and Francie’s affair, which in breaking the incest taboo, hits his patriarchal family structure at the very core (Rubin 1998:541). In her representation of Aunt Margaret, Carter re-writes the tradition of the silent heroine who “*can only redeem herself through her own obliteration*” (Attwood 1998:87).<sup>10</sup> Although the music that Margaret and Francie is a substitution for, not an articulation of, bodily experience: “*Aunt Margaret put the flute sideways to her lips, eagerly, as though she were thirsty for it*” (51), Margaret regains her voice in the closing pages of the novel. This reunion of body and voice is an empowering shift for Margaret, who is now able to confront Philip and save her loved ones, by telling them how to escape the burning house.

Yet the novel’s ending leaves many questions unanswered. By leaving Francie and Margaret’s fate unknown, Carter refuses to cast a censorious gothic judgement on the incestuous couple, and at the same time avoids a conventional happy ending. In spite of Uncle Philip’s machinations, Melanie is confident in her new-found freedom, assuring

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the archetypal silent heroine is Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1747-8), who starves herself to death following her rape.

Finn: “*We can only be like ourselves and one another*” (199), in an attempt to define them as self-sufficient and autonomous, free from cultural and social influences and demands. Similarly, we do not know whether Uncle Philip is alive or dead, and are therefore prevented from drawing oversimplified conclusions about the future of patriarchal power.

## Conclusion

I began my paper by asking a specific question about the relationship between mutes and adolescent girls in Carson McCullers’ *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and Angela Carter’s *The Magic Toyshop*. I have found that the mute figure has been a starting point from which my discussion has branched out into broader questions about women’s relationship to language and to the body. In keeping with Michel Foucault’s assertion that “[t]here is not one but many silences” (27), my paper shows that there is not one, but many versions of female adolescence. ‘Female adolescence’ is not a stable, ahistorical condition, but a category that is fragmented and differentiated by intersecting social and historical factors, including class, sex and race.

In my introduction, I outlined how women’s reading, writing and speaking are described using metaphors of sexuality, appetite, and emission. Through such metaphors, women’s speech is linked to a conception of the female body defined as grotesque. What options are there, for women whose speech is always limited to their body, and whose body always speaks alterity and abjection to male interpretation?

In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers undermines the “*dominant scopic economy*” of Western patriarchal culture, in which women’s bodies are constructed as passive objects of contemplation (Irigaray 1985:26). When Mick loses her virginity she expects it to show physically but her body remains resistant to definitive visual interpretation (244). Instead, Mick’s experiences are articulated through a disembodied voice — her music. In *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988), Kaja Silverman argues that within patriarchal society, the disembodied female voice offers the possibility of liberation from male objectification. To separate the female voice from the body is to place the female subject “*beyond the reach of the male gaze [... and] the interrogation about her place, her time, and her desires which constantly resecurer her*” (1988:164).

However, the close of McCullers’ novel suggests that in the face of the ‘dominant scopic economy’, a disembodied voice cannot be sustained. When Antonapoulos dies, Singer believes that he has lost the one person who understands him. The final statement that Singer’s hands make, is to hold the gun that kills him. Singer’s voice is relocated in his body, as his feelings of hopelessness and despair are communicated via his dead form. Despite Singer’s belief in him, Antonapoulos showed little evidence of comprehending his friend’s outpourings, and Singer in turn did not understand Mick as she imagined — “*She knows I am deaf but she thinks I know about music*” (190). But like Singer, as long as Mick believed that her disembodied voice was heard, she continued to nurture her musical talent.

After Singer’s death, Mick still hopes to be a musician, but “*now no music was in her mind [...] the store took all her energy and time*” (307). A combination of factors — including her demanding job and the loss of Singer — prevents Mick from being able to

imagine a way of expressing herself outside the limits of Symbolic language. Mick conforms to male representations of femininity, losing her 'rough and childish ways' to become 'ladylike and delicate' (310, 311). Taking a full-time job to help her family, she conforms to the tradition of the Southern heroine, whose underlying strength is "*exerted only within the home and only to serve the husband, the family, and the South*" (Goodwyn Jones 1981:13). Mick makes concessions to Symbolic language, and unlike Singer, finds a way to survive within its limits. But the extent to which she will be able to maintain her individual way of expressing herself through music, is a question left unanswered.

In Angela Carter's '*The Magic Toyshop*', Melanie is constantly objectified by male discourse, and her body appropriated by other people's fantasies. Her own pleasure is mediated by male fantasy, as she understands her body through artistic and literary representations of women. Yet Carter represents the disembodied female voice as disempowered, and ultimately relocates the female voice within the body. At the same time, Carter does not advocate Luce Irigaray's concept of feminine language, modelled on the female body, as a way of escaping male-oriented discourse. Irigaray's theory is challenged by postmodern theorists such as Judith Butler, who argues that there is no "*body prior to its cultural inscription*" (130); bodily contours and sensations are known only through language. As Silverman emphasises: "*if the body is the place where pleasure is finally experienced, that pleasure is made possible only through what happens elsewhere, in memory, fantasy, and history*" (1988:147).

At the end of the novel, Melanie hopes to have escaped a cultural history that defines her: "*We can only be like ourselves and one another*" (199). However, the continued use of cultural references implies that it is impossible to get outside of prevailing discourses, but that it may be possible to reappropriate them. In the opening pages of the novel, Melanie perceives her body through the words of John Donne. Now, towards the close, she quotes him again, in describing her relationship with Finn: "*My face in thine eye, thine in mine appears*" (193). This interchange of gazes is foreshadowed when Melanie uses the hole that Finn cut in her bedroom wall to spy on him. Similarly, the closing line — "*At night, in the garden, they faced each other in a wild surmise*" (200) — loops back to the Keats reference in the opening paragraph of the novel.

Carter's choice of quotations suggests that Finn and Melanie's relationship is defined by reciprocity and equality. Carter does not imagine a space 'outside' of language from which women can speak and understand their bodies. Instead, Melanie and Margaret enter into Symbolic language in order to appropriate it for themselves. Carter suggests that male subjectivity is also shaped by cultural representations and discourse. In doing so, she makes an important gesture towards 'feminising' male subjectivity, acknowledging that it is also defined by a loss of direct contact with the body, subordination to the gaze of the Other, and entry into a predetermined symbolic order (Silverman 1988:149).

McCullers and Carter are writers celebrated for their representations of the body using gothic, grotesque, and carnivalesque modes. This paper shows that instances in which they employ disembodiment, and hence evade the gendered implications of the grotesque, are similarly interesting and intelligent, and offer further opportunities for critical study. Elisabeth Mahoney argues that it is in "*the space between the phantasmic*

and the real that a radical discourse might emerge”, that is, a discourse able to articulate a feminine sexual subject (1997:76). Ultimately, McCullers and Carter confirm this assertion. In ‘*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*’ and ‘*The Magic Toyshop*’, neither the disembodied female voice nor an embodied ‘feminine’ language is represented as a lasting, viable alternative to Symbolic language. This suggests the need for a middle ground, where women can engage with and struggle for authorial power.

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