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Rebellion and the quest for self: masculine women and tomboys across race in *The Member of the Wedding* by Carson McCullers and *Meridian* by Alice Walker

by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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2002

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Graduate College
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This is to certify that the master's thesis of

Susan M. Fey

has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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INTRODUCTION

A pattern of rebellion is noticeable in many Southern texts written by black and white women authors, although the reasons for defiance are separated by race. Female literary figures in contemporary American literature are often masculinized, either as young girls or as adult women, in order to define their place within an oppressive culture. “Masculinity” is a term usually reserved for males as its formal definition indicates, but the definition is evolving. Judith Halberstam points out that “masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege” (Female Masculinity 2). Halberstam rejects masculinity as applying only to white middle-class males, recognizing masculine characteristics within white and minority women, forming a new term: “female masculinity.” Within this term lies a sub-term, “tomboys,” which as Webster’s Dictionary points out, is wholly related to “boyish behavior.” Halberstam defines “tomboy” as “an extended childhood period of female masculinity” which she notes is quite common in adolescent girls (5). Halberstam qualifies her definition by pointing out that male adolescence in American culture is seen as a celebration or a “rite of passage,” while “for girls, adolescence is a lesson in restraint, punishment, and repression. It is in the context of female adolescence that the tomboy instincts of millions of girls are remodeled into compliant forms of femininity” (6). Halberstam’s views are rigid, but verifiable within certain Southern texts.

For example, Scout Finch, a white adolescent literary figure in Harper Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird, published in 1960, is viewed by critics as a quintessential tomboy, because she refuses to act like a “lady” at her Aunt Alexandra’s request; Scout detests wearing dresses
and desires to wear only pants. Dean Shackelford comments on Scout’s tomboyism in relationship to Harper Lee: “The novel’s female-centered narration provides an opportunity for Lee to comment on her own childlike perceptions as well as her recognition of the problems of growing up female in the South” (121). The “problems of growing up female in the South” are directly related to the masculinity of some female characters, particularly young white girls like Scout Finch.

In order to understand “tomboyism,” it is necessary to recognize the position of the Southern belle as presented in American literature. Kathryn Lee Seidel refers to Bel Tracy in the novel *Swallow Barn*, published in 1832, as the first recognizable “belle” (1). Seidel defines a belle from the 1820’s through the 1850’s as “the young, unmarried daughter of a landed … family, who lives on a great plantation. She is of marriageable age, ready to be courted. Although she may be only sixteen or seventeen, she is regarded as being at the zenith of her life” (3). This formulation is not altogether different from the formal definition of a belle: “a popular and attractive girl or woman; esp: a girl or woman whose charm and beauty make her the favorite <the- of the ball>” (Merriam-Webster 143).

Shirley Abbott’s commentary matches Seidel’s view of early Southern belles: “Of all the skills a Southern woman is supposed to master, managing men is the most important. The unified field theory of the science, briefly stated, is that the first step in managing men is to be a belle. Having captured and married the man of her choice, the belle then turns into a lady” (105). In her book, published in 1998, Abbott recognizes that belles are still present in the South, and that “even now, belles still thrive. They turn out in the hundreds to be presented at debutante balls and grand assemblies and cotillions as authorized, anointed belles” (106).
Seidel recognizes the Southern Renaissance as vitally important in Southern literature and its representation of women as belles. While she does not see belles eliminated from Southern writing, she notices a significant change in women's critical response to them, since "the Southern Renaissance was a birth, not a rebirth, of self-awareness in southern culture, beliefs, ceremonies, rituals, legends..." (31). Belles were no longer revered in Southern literature as they once had been; the romantic view of the belle changed, and many women authors began to leave the belle out of their novels altogether.

The archaic tradition of the Southern belle causes certain Southern white female authors and characters to resist the role. Accordingly, adolescent and teenage girls are liberated from prescribed roles of femininity and appear as tomboys in women's fiction. As I will show, these female tomboy characters, like Scout, are an extension of the author's own life. The struggle of being a young white girl who resists the "legend" of being a belle or a lady is not easy. Many white Southern authors including Harper Lee, Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Carson McCullers struggled to be taken seriously because of the cultural history preceding them as women in the South. These particular white female authors worked to write the belle out of their own literature, and characters like Scout Finch appear instead. Therein lies the dichotomy between Southern white and black women in contemporary literature. White female authors eliminate belles, which frees white female characters from prescribed societal roles. Black female authors have many more obstacles to face and to transcend.

While white women writers have written belles out of their novels, thus refusing to perpetuate the tradition of white women characters who are submissive to white men in a patriarchal society, black women authors, through their female characters, work to overcome oppression by white and black men, as well as by white women. Historically, black women
have been eroticized, depicted as sexual creatures who are victimized by white males. Additionally, white women who saw black women as servants or "mammies," not equals, discriminated against them. Linda Tate traces the discriminatory relationship between black and white women, quoting Minrose Gwin: "'color lines blinded white women to the humanity of their black sisters and built in black women massive layers of hatred for those fair ladies who would not, or could not see their suffering'" (47). Therefore, black women are defying not only oppression brought on by a history of white patriarchal society, but by white matriarchal society as well. Barbara Smith addresses the effects of this history of oppression, which obstructs the relationship between black and white women: "Black women have known that their lives in some ways incorporated goals that white middle-class women were striving for, but race and class privilege, of course, reshaped the meaning of those goals profoundly...women of color generally have the fewest choices about the circumstances in their lives" (xxvi). Smith does not see black women as being "liberated" from oppression; instead she sees that "black women have had to take on responsibilities that our oppression gives us no choice but to handle" (xxvi). That is, black women have had to define themselves in terms of "we," in order to fight against "them," in the system of race oppression.

Black women characters in contemporary literature often strive to claim their place within their own history and culture, as is reflected in Alice Walker's definition of a "Womanist" as a woman "committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female" (In Search xi). Walker's Southern experience was laden with racial separatism, oppression, and hard work. For a black woman growing up in the South, the opportunity and pressure to become a "belle" were unknown, and were replaced by a quest for survival in a racially segregated society. Walker reveals her "womanist" stance, projecting her fight for
black women into her literature, explaining that she is “committed to exploring the oppressions, the insanities, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women” (O’Brien 331). Jacquelyn Grant, a professor of black theology, discusses why womanist theology exists:

> When one considers the conditions under which blacks were forced to exist in Mississippi and other parts of the deep South, it is easy to conclude that in the minds of whites, blacks were less than human. In our modern history what we find is the viewing of black life through the lens of white racist America. In so doing, then, blacks are defined not in terms of their own existence, but in terms of the needs of whites. Though slavery was no longer legal [in the 1960’s], blacks were still perceived as servants, whose only function was to facilitate the needs of whites. (43)

Grant writes about Fannie Lou Hamer⁵, and her work during the civil rights movement as it connects with a womanist theology. Hamer became part of the Negro suffrage movement, and continued to be a moving force within the civil rights movement. Hamer joined with countless others to work toward freedom for all black people, which is a key element in Walker’s writing.

> Black women immerse themselves in their culture in order to defy oppression by white culture, which goes far beyond Southern culture. This ideology is represented in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, published in 1973, which spans 46 years, from 1919-1965. Although *Sula* is set in the Midwest, it presents the idea of identity and rebellion. Sula defies all of Medallion’s expectations with her outlandish lifestyle, which makes others question her identity. “You can’t act like a man,” her friend Nel tells her, “You can’t be walking around all independent-like, doing whatever you like...” (142). To which Sula replies, “You say I’m a woman and colored. Ain’t that the same as being a man?” (142). Sula questions all codes of gender and race, and even when dying she reveals her strong spirit to Nel when she asks
her, "You think I don’t know what your life is like just because I ain’t living it?" Sula continues by explaining how her strength makes her unlike other black women: "I know what every colored woman in this country is doing ... Dying. Just like me. But the difference is they dying like a stump. Me, I’m going down like one of those redwoods. I sure did live in this world" (143). Sula’s last name, "Peace," is an ironic twist, because she is bold and vivacious, continually rebelling against the mainstream, and hence of the "womanist" spirit. Sula leaves a legacy that Nel finds she needs at the end of the book—"We was girls together" (174)—revealing an important connection between black women in Morrison’s novels, and their need to unite and fight for one another. Walker’s character Meridian and Morrison’s Sula are interconnected, because, as Arunima Ray points out, “their individual quests for selfhood are precipitated by different personal needs and reflect different attitudes toward the human condition. The stages of their journeys towards selfhood ... are decidedly different. But the goals of their quests are the same—a cleaner understanding of self, and expanded room in which to hum their own melodies and sing their own lyrics" (61). Their related “quest for selfhood” is visible throughout both novels and reflects the importance of black women finding their identity as tied to their culture.

Female masculinity, black or white, within contemporary Southern literature is tied to a conflicted history involving oppression and submission. In my thesis, I will explore two Southern novels, one written by a white author portraying a young white tomboy, and another written by a black author portraying a black adult masculine female. In Chapter One I will discuss Frankie Addams in The Member of the Wedding, written by Carson McCullers in 1946. After summarizing and analyzing Frankie’s character and her tomboyish characteristics, I will look at McCullers’s own conflicted past in the South. The author’s defiance of the “belle” tradition is seen in many of her novels, particularly in The Member of
the Wedding. Frankie Addams appears confused and emotionally upset throughout the novel as she tries to find the “we of me.” Her tomboyish nature makes her question her identity as a female, but she never reaches any sort epiphany about herself. In fact, the ending of the novel only adds further complexities to Frankie’s life, which may be a reflection of McCullers’s own life experiences.

In Chapter Two I will discuss Meridian Hill in *Meridian* by Alice Walker, written in 1976, thirty years after *The Member of the Wedding*. Since this novel was written later, I will use McCullers’s novel as a means for comparison and contrast between texts, characters, and authors. Walker, as a black woman writer from the South, has her own set of conflicts embedded in Southern culture. Meridian’s journey through the novel reflects Walker’s womanist spirit, and the need for black women to become immersed in their culture to find and assert their individuality. Meridian’s masculinity is part of her triumph over her individual past, and part of the progression to her true self within her culture. In Chapter Two I will show the difference between Frankie and Meridian’s masculinity, as well as what masculinity represents in each culture, as seen through Walker and McCullers. The end of Walker’s novel is far more “resolved” and uplifting than McCullers’s novel. Meridian reaches an epiphany, so to speak, which relates to Walker’s continued message about black women.

In the conclusion, I tie both texts together, by recognizing the similarities and differences between Frankie and Meridian and McCullers and Walker. Beyond comparing these characters and authors, I try to reach an understanding about why females are masculinized in Southern texts. Both McCullers and Walker felt the South was oppressive, and their troubled pasts as Southern writers may provide reasons for white and black female masculinity in Southern women’s fiction.
CHAPTER ONE

Frankie Addams and Identity: “I wish I was someone else except me.”

At the beginning of The Member of the Wedding by Carson McCullers, the reader is introduced to Frankie Addams, who is twelve years old, reaching puberty and growing up in Georgia. Because Frankie’s mother died when Frankie was born, Frankie lives with her father. Frankie’s father is mostly absent from her life, so Berenice, their black cook, “mothers” her. Frankie’s best friend, John Henry, is the most feminine character in the novel, portraying an androgynous male. As the novel opens, Frankie and Berenice are discussing Frankie’s brother’s wedding. Jarvis has just announced he is getting married to a girl named Janice, which has left Frankie feeling desperate to find a place where she belongs. Jarvis and Janice have something that Frankie wants: they are a “we.” Frankie is “sick unto death” with the realization that she is alone while her brother and Janice have each other. McCullers portrays Frankie as a tomboy with her crew-cut, dirty elbows, and tall, gangly build. Frankie is likened to the freaks she sees at the Freak House, making her “afraid of all the Freaks, for it seemed to her that they had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: we know you” (18). Frankie feels “freakish,” and begins to change, acting out by stealing and doing other “no-good” acts. McCullers shows that Frankie’s pubescence is causing her to have new realizations about herself, in terms of emotions and changes within her body, and Frankie is unsure how to respond to them.

Frankie begins thinking more about the world, and her place in it, which ultimately creates fear, because “she was afraid of these things that made her suddenly wonder who she was, and what she was going to be in this world, and why she was standing at that minute,
seeing a light or listening, or staring up at the sky, alone” (22). Frankie’s “fear” relates to her sexual identity as a young girl, and her place within her society. McCullers hints at this when Frankie’s father realizes Frankie is too old to be sleeping in his bed, asking her, “Who is this great big long-legged twelve-year-old blunderbuss who still wants to sleep with her father anymore?” (22). From then on, Frankie must sleep alone, but McCullers seems to hint that Frankie’s father feels sexual tension with his daughter becoming a woman, which indicates a potentially incestuous relationship between Frankie and her father. Throughout the rest of the book, her father is at work, coming home late, or waking up with a hangover, suggesting his emotional instability, perhaps due to the loss of his wife and his unhealthy sexual desire for Frankie. Frankie is confused and angry when her father suddenly makes her sleep in her own bedroom. As the novel continues, it is clear that the main reason Frankie feels like a “freak” is her confusion about both her sexual identity, and sexual intercourse. Frankie has witnessed a few sexual encounters: one in the garage with Barney MacKean, a neighborhood boy, and another between the boarders at her house. Yet, she does not realize what “sex” entails, and sees the boarders as having some sort of “fit.” She becomes angry about the encounter with Barney, and wants to “throw a knife between his eyes” (78). All of Frankie’s changes from a young girl into a woman are associated with her misunderstanding sex, relationships, and her own identity.

Frankie’s identity is far different from that of the other girls and boys in her class. McCullers vividly points out that Frankie is outside of her peer group, especially when some of them walk by her house: “There was in the neighborhood a clubhouse, and Frankie was not a member. The members of the club were girls who were thirteen and fourteen and even fifteen years old” (10). The group rejects Frankie because she is younger, and because the other members thought her “too mean” (10). Frankie is not a member of any group; her
family is void of close connections, and her friendships with other girls or boys her own age are nonexistent. She spends her free time with John Henry, having him over to spend the night or play cards. Frankie imagines that she will be invited to live with Jarvis and Janice, and she will be a family with them. In her hopes to belong to a “we of me,” Frankie names herself F. Jasmine, creating a “JA” in her name like Jarvis and Janice. F. Jasmine plans to buy a wedding dress to wear to the wedding, and tells her father and Berenice that she will be leaving town with the married couple.

Frankie’s shopping trip to buy her dress leads to an exploration of her town, which links her childhood with her impending adulthood. Frankie “went into places she had never dreamed of entering until that day” (44). Frankie ends up drinking beer with a drunk soldier in the Blue Moon hotel, which further emphasizes Frankie’s naïveté about sex and men. When the soldier refers to Frankie as a “cute dish,” she misunderstands his reference, noticing that “there were no dishes on the table and she had the uneasy feeling he had begun to talk a kind of double-talk” (67). Frankie soon decides to go home, but not without accepting a date for later that night with the soldier.

Once Frankie leaves the bar, she runs into a girl who is two years younger than she is and “stopped her on the street to tell her her plans. She told her also that a soldier had invited her to have a date, and now she told it in a bragging tone” (69). The young girl joins Frankie in her search for a wedding dress, which “meant the trying-on of more than a dozen beautiful dresses” (69). Frankie is misdirected and naïve, but her “trying on” of dresses represents her development into a woman. McCullers portrays Frankie acting inappropriately as she interacts with a man twice her age, drinks beer, and makes plans to meet him for a date. In the following scene, she tells a ten-year-old about the date and takes her shopping. The reader never sees this “girl” reappear in the text, suggesting that she is placed as a symbol of
Frankie’s impending loss of innocence. It may be that the young girl is Frankie herself, as F. Jasmine takes her by the hand and leads her into puberty.

When Frankie meets the soldier their encounter ends in confusion and violence. The potential rape is foiled when Frankie knocks him out with a pitcher and runs home. McCullers does not present any healthy heterosexual relationships in the novel; in fact, Frankie seems to become less and less enchanted with being “female” as the book progresses. At the end, when John Henry dies and Frankie meets Mary Littlejohn, it is obvious that Mary is a part of John Henry, hence “Littlejohn.” Frankie seems to have found a “Half Man Half Woman” through another person, a notion she considered early in the novel, wishing “that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted” (92). Although Frankie cannot realize that ideal in herself, she finds it in Mary; Frankie’s sexual identity has not entirely evolved, but it seems clear to the reader that she is a lesbian.

McCullers presents a possible adult version of John Henry in Lily Mae Jenkins, although Jenkins is black. However, John Henry is portrayed as an endearing young boy, while Lily May Jenkins is presented as freakish. McCullers seems to be making the point that Southern culture cannot accept alternatives to prescribed gender roles, and consistently “hermaphroditic or androgynous references are placed in a negative frame, for the novel’s entire movement is towards Frankie’s ultimate submission to the inexorable demand that she accept her sex as female” (Westling, “Carson McCullers’s Tomboys” 345). The need for Frankie to accept her sexuality as feminine, or “female,” represents societal pressure in the South for the white woman to become a “belle” or a “lady.” “The Half-Man Half Woman” at the Chattahoochee Exposition also presents a freakish view of transvestites or androgynous characters. Overall, there is a definite element of the grotesque related to feminine males and
masculine females, especially when they are adults. McCullers portrays tomboys and young males as somewhat acceptable until puberty; however, once adult societal pressure sets in, adult figures like Lily May Jenkins are considered improper and intolerable.

Frankie, later F. Jasmine, and still later Frances, all carry the same problem with them: this female character is unable to find contentment either in herself or with others. F. Jasmine searches for her femininity, coming up short and crying with Berenice and John Henry; however, “F. Jasmine did not know why she cried, but the reason she named was the crew-cut and the fact that her elbows were so rusty” (116). F. Jasmine cannot pinpoint the reason for her sadness, because she is unsure of what to name it. Yet, in pointing to her “tomboy” characteristics, she senses that becoming a young woman is impossible or wrong. Louise Westling points out that Frankie and F. Jasmine’s awkward transitions in the novel are more clearly revealed when “McCullers uses the motif of unfinished music to underline and intensify Frankie’s dilemma,” because it “[suggests] the proper resolution to her confused view of herself” (“Tomboys and Revolting Femininity” 161). Westling shows how at the beginning of the novel Frankie hears the blues music, and later the piano tuner’s discordant sounds when Frankie is feeling trapped. Westling sees the “unfinished music” as “closely linked to Frankie’s spiritual kinship with the blacks of her little Southern town” (162). Berenice and Frankie both feel trapped inside their bodies. Berenice sees herself “caught” because of racial discrimination, and Frankie feels “caught” because she is questioning her sexual identity.

McCullers’s Exploration of Femininity and Sexuality

McCullers’s novel questions the role of young women in the South during the 1930’s; her portrayal of Frankie is of an aggressive, adventurous tomboy with an unresolved story.
Frankie does not take part in any rituals involving becoming a “belle” or a “lady.” As Westling points out, “The girl who persists in her boyish freedom through adolescence becomes odder and odder, as social indulgence changes to disapproval. Dresses must be worn; manners must be restrained and graceful. As a girl the tomboy is charming, but as an adult she is grotesque” (Sacred Groves 113). Westling believes that by the end Frankie has relinquished her ties to “tomboyism,” and is now approaching femininity, which makes her story resolved. I disagree, because Frankie has only found someone else to make her feel as if she is special or a “we.” Frankie is unable to truly find happiness in herself, which means she still questions her sexual or emotional identity.

Carson McCullers was born Lula Carson Smith on February 19, 1917 in Columbus, Georgia to Lamar and Marguerite Waters Smith. Lula was named after her maternal grandmother and kept the name until her eighth grade year after visiting her aunt and uncle in Cincinnati, Ohio. During her trip, her northern cousins teased her about her first name, and when she came home she informed her family that she would only be called “Carson.” Her family usually referred to Carson as “Sister,” anyway, but Carson remained her first name throughout the rest of her life. Much like Frankie, who changes her name to F. Jasmine and then Frances, Carson wanted to find a name for herself that sounded more mature. McCullers works this into The Member of the Wedding, along with several other autobiographical elements from her childhood in the South.

McCullers’s books all seem to have characters that resemble her or someone from her life, from Frankie Addams to Mick Kelly in The Heart is the Lonely Hunter, published in 1940. However, one characteristic in both Mick and Frankie is that they are both tomboys, uninterested in promenades or neighborhood clubs. When McCullers was growing up in
Georgia, she had difficulties fitting in with her peers, and felt like an outcast even with her closest friend, Helen Jackson, as Virginia Spencer Carr relays:

The fact that Helen Jackson and several others in the neighborhood had a horse or pony and she did not, that many others on her block had a fulltime maid and her family did not, that some of the children seemed to have much more spending money than she, that her family seemed less secure financially than those who lived around her—all became exaggerated painful reminders that she was different, somehow an entity set apart from any group. (23)

This alienation is the same kind that Frankie feels when she realizes her brother is getting married and she is jealous of his relationship with Janice. Frankie wants her own connection, or place to belong, just as McCullers did during her adolescent years. When McCullers was nine, her family moved to a more affluent neighborhood in Columbus where she was separated from her only friend Helen and thrown into a new circle of girls who were only interested in social events. McCullers was painfully unhappy and remarked that she “hated more than anything else being made to do ‘sissy things with sissy little girls’” (Carr 22). The following year, the Smith family moved back to their old neighborhood where she was reunited with Jackson, although acceptance into her peer group still tended to be difficult.

In order to belong to a group, McCullers would often compete in athletic events with her classmates. These endeavors never ended up being a positive ones, because Carson was not particularly agile or athletic, causing her further frustration and humiliation, because she was “painfully sensitive on the inside, easily hurt, [and] she yearned to be accepted unquestioningly by the group” (Carr 24). Although Carson responded outwardly to teasing as if she did not care, inside she felt lonely and isolated, which is tied directly to Frankie Addams. Berenice characterizes Frankie’s attitude as “mean,” and often times this characterization is justified as Frankie responds in an aggressive manner toward Berenice or
John Henry. However, it is obvious that despite Frankie’s “meanness,” she desperately wants to “fit in,” somewhere, but she does not understand how.

McCullers finally found her “we of me” through playing the piano. She was a member of a group named “The Loud-Mouthed Dancers,” and “naive at first, [McCullers] seemed pleased to belong. Then she realized that she was a member because the group needed a piano player” (Carr 24). A fellow member of the group went so far as to admit that the group did not really like Carson, because she was “temperamental,” and only let her remain in the group because she provided the music for their dancing. Again, Carson was not an accepted member of the group. Fortunately for McCullers, her piano playing let her “belong” in a group that included her piano teacher Mary Tucker and the Tucker family, whom she found to be supportive and loving. When McCullers realized she wanted to be a writer at age 17, she ended her ambitions to be a concert pianist, but music “provided the balm that humans in their inhumanity could not have given her” (Carr 24). The music heard throughout The Member of the Wedding amounts to McCullers weaving this memory in and out of the text. McCullers’s connection to Frankie is implicit every time Frankie hears the blues music in the distance. These two females are inextricably linked.

McCullers’s relationships with her classmates did not improve throughout her high school years. At times, her classmates tormented her: “The first week at school I was literally captured by a girl when I was in the basement. She threw me to the floor and said ‘Say fuck three times’” (McCullers, Illumination and Night Glare 12). McCullers did not know why this girl behaved so awfully or what “fuck” meant, but she knew what had happened to her was “ugly and wicked” (12). This event may be shown in The Member of the Wedding when “[Frankie and Barney] committed a queer sin, and how bad it was [Frankie] did not know. She hated Barney and wanted to kill him” (23). This “queer sin” in
the book reflects the meaning of “fuck,” which the young Carson McCullers did not understand.

While many girls were dating and having social events called “proms” at their homes, McCullers “shied away from proms, where refreshments and a little handholding and kissing were the primary attractions” (Carr 29). Although Carson was coerced into having a few social events at her house, she dreaded them, since “such affairs were agonizing ordeals for the self-conscious, gangly girl who was painfully aware of her lack of popularity” (Carr 29). It was obvious that Carson was unlike her other female classmates, and thus she was deemed “eccentric.” She dressed differently from the other girls in her class, wearing tennis shoes instead of heels and pantyhose. The girls responded poorly to her dress, and “some of the girls gathered in little clumps of femininity and threw rocks at her when she walked nearby, snickering loud asides and tossing within hearing distance such descriptive labels as ‘weird,’ ‘freakish-looking,’ and ‘queer’” (Carr 30). Her classmates did not understand her willingness to be different; when she wore out-dated clothes or did not go to the beauty parlor, they were appalled. While some of these experiences are a horrible part of adolescence in everyone’s life, Carson felt that most of her pain and feelings of suffocation were due to prevailing attitudes in the South, which is why she moved to New York at age 17 and never returned to the South except for visits or to recuperate from her many illnesses.

At age 20, on September 20, 1937, Carson Smith married Reeves McCullers; the marriage was tumultuous, passionless, and ended in divorce twice, after her remarrying him in 1945. In the summer of 1940, Carson met Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach and immediately fell in love with her, admitting “she had a face I knew would haunt me to the end of my life” (McCullers, Illumination and Night Glare 22). The two women had several commonalities, and “even Annemarie’s taste in clothes coincided with Carson’s. According
to Annemarie’s sister, their mother had always dressed Annemarie as a boy” (Carr 103). They were also both successful writers and talented piano players. Both women were involved in unhappy marriages and became intimately involved with one another. Although the affair did not last long, its effect led to Carson and Reeves’s marital separation in 1940, and later their first divorce in 1942. Carson had a difficult time recovering from her love affair with Annemarie, which made her ambivalent about her marriage to Reeves. Reeves and Carson remarried, but their marriage was extremely volatile, ending in their second divorce in 1953. On November 19, 1953, Reeves killed himself at the Hotel Chateau-Frontenac in Paris (Carr 403).

Carson’s marriage and re-marriage to Reeves is a confusing aspect of her life, but is definitely related to her need to conform to society. Both Carson and Reeves were bisexual, although Reeves had a difficult time handling it, as Carr explains: “Reeves was incapable of coping with his wife’s sexual inclinations or of helping her to become more heterosexually oriented. Carson was completely open to her friends about her tremendous enjoyment in being physically close to attractive women. She was always more physically attracted to women than to men” (295). Why Carson married is questionable, but it is logical to conclude that she felt it was expected by society. When *The Member of the Wedding* was published in 1946, McCullers had been involved with Annemarie, and she had been divorced and remarried to Reeves. It is evident that McCullers presents Frankie as a young girl with an identity crisis, which involves femininity, masculinity, and sexuality.

**Carson and Frankie: Deconstructing Belles**

*The Member of the Wedding* reflects many instances and scenarios that were a part of McCullers’s own troubled past growing up in the South. McCullers had difficulties with her
Southern heritage and said she felt separated from Southern culture. McCullers said that she had “no roots,” which is why she never returned to her hometown Columbus, Georgia after 1953 (Presley 110). McCullers never embraced the South and, as a bisexual woman, found it suffocating, which led her to build “her life on the hope that, somehow, Paris or New York would reach down and rescue her from the frustration and stagnation she felt and feared in the South” (Presley 110). McCullers found a positive side to her Southern heritage, noting that Columbus, “with its stifling heat and its oppressive social mores, never ceased to nourish her imagination and sharpen her thinking.” However, McCullers “knew she would have to leave Columbus if she was going to build a life for herself rather than submit to one” (Savigneau 242, 35). As a young woman in the 1930’s, McCullers dressed in men’s clothing and took on a masculine persona, which did not match the idea of a “Southern woman,” and this became one of the reasons she left the South. McCullers conveys her emotions about the South through her literature, as Louis D. Rubin Jr. points out, “McCullers’s fiction, in particular The Member of the Wedding, can speak to the adolescent reader in a very intense fashion, for what it conveys is the frustration and pain of being more than a child and yet not an adult, with the agony of self-awareness and sense of isolation thereby involved” (114).

The Member of the Wedding explores the “stifling” mindset that McCullers found in the South. Berenice describes herself as being “caught” because of the racism she feels in the South. Although Frankie cannot entirely understand Berenice’s dilemma, she empathizes because she too feels caught inside a body she does not understand. McCullers creates Frankie as a way to rebel against a patriarchal South that, for McCullers, had no place for her. Although the Southern Renaissance criticized the image of a belle, acting like a “lady” or even becoming a sort of “belle” was still part of McCullers’s teenage years. Girls were dressing to attract boys and be “feminine,” while McCullers was playing the piano and
writing instead of attending social events. Obviously, McCullers chose a lifestyle that was considered “mannish,” with her clothing style and choice of career, and she was able to pursue it successfully only in the North.

McCullers intimates that she is poking fun at or directly criticizing “belledom” for example, Frankie is appalled when Jarvis brings her a doll and she gives it to John Henry. John Henry is excited about this prospect, which further acknowledges his androgynous persona, and decides to name the doll “Belle” (15). The doll is described as being “a large doll with red hair and china eyes that opened and closed, and yellow eyelashes” (16). Frankie demands that the doll be removed because it is making her “nervous” as its eyes open and shut (16). This scene in particular shows McCullers’s complete disregard for the traditional image of a “belle.” By making the doll’s name “Belle,” she implies that women who are belles are plastic and artificial, only good to play with; i.e., belles are like rag dolls. Frankie wants nothing to do with the doll, especially after John Henry names it “Belle.”

Even though John Henry is an androgynous boy who enjoys acting and dressing like a girl, it is notable that he names the doll and takes “it to the back porch where he could pick it up when he went home” (16). John Henry, a young boy, takes control of the “belle,” by taking it home to live with him. Additionally, in the next passage, John Henry announces he is now going to name the doll, “Lily Belle,” which is seemingly related to Lily Mae Jenkins, the transvestite, who as Berenice explains, “turned into a girl. He changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl” (76). McCullers consistently redefines gender identity throughout her book, and this is one place where she takes the “belle” image and radically transforms it into a grotesque figure.

When Frankie purchases her wedding dress, an “orange satin evening dress,” Berenice recognizes it as inappropriate and tells Frankie to take it back to the store (84-85).
The dress is a woman's evening gown, and in it Frankie looks as if she is playing dress-up. Her short hair, "rusty elbows," and "hunched shoulders" reveal that the dress does not "fit" (84-85). Berenice alters the dress so that it looks presentable, but Frankie is never fully included in the wedding; she is only a guest at the ceremony. The dress is inappropriate, and like the tradition of belles, is outdated and unnecessary. Jarvis and Janice's wedding ends with Frankie crying hysterically as she realizes she is not in fact a "member of the wedding."

Unresolved Conclusions

McCullers' novel is unresolved on many levels, and this lack of resolution is portrayed in several situations throughout the text. When Frankie leaves home after the wedding, she is trying to escape her "shabby" home and lonely existence. It is somewhat unclear throughout the entire book what and who she wants to run away from, but her main quest is for the "we of me." Frankie wants to find something or someone to fulfill her identity, and she cannot find it within herself, which is self-reflexive of McCullers because she grew up without many friends. Frankie even considers going back to the soldier and asking him to marry her, rationalizing to herself that "before he had gone crazy, he had been a little nice" (146). Frankie sees marriage as a way out of her house, a way to achieve wholeness, which again could be a reflection of McCullers herself, who left Columbus and soon after met and married Reeves. However, Frankie is only 12, and marriage is not an option for her, so her escapade ends when Officer Wylie identifies her as missing and calls her father to come and get her. When the officer asks what she is doing in the Blue Moon bar, Frankie replies, "I don't know" (147). At this point, Frankie begins to transform into someone else, feeling as if "the world was too far away, and there was no way any more that she could be included...she felt queer as a person drowning" (149). There is a sad realization
of something being lost, or left behind, perhaps her childhood or the tomboy with “rusty elbows” and a butch haircut who carried a pistol.

When Frankie’s father finds her, the transformation is complete, and “he looked at her with the eyes as china as a doll’s, and in them there was only the reflection of her own lost face” (149). This description mirrors that of the doll Lily Belle Frankie gave to John Henry. Frankie sees a reflection of herself as something “grotesque.” Her tomboyism is relinquished, and as Frankie turns 13, Frankie and F. Jasmine become Frances. Along with losing Frankie’s tomboyism, John Henry loses his life, which leaves his life unfinished. John Henry is almost reincarnated through Mary “Littlejohn.” Obviously McCullers wanted to show that John Henry’s androgynous nature would not be accepted in a boy, and she shows a part of him through a little girl.

At the end of the novel, Frankie becomes more feminine, abandoning her tomboyish identity. This ending for Frankie is unfair because she has not realized her identity entirely, if at all, and finds happiness only through another little girl, Mary Littlejohn. McCullers is pointing out the unfortunate fate of most tomboys in the South during the 1930’s: they are forced into becoming the type of women they once detested. At the beginning of *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie plays with knives, cutting calluses off her feet in the kitchen. By the end of the novel, Frances is “cutting [sandwiches] into fancy shapes” for her guest, Mary, who is coming over to spend the night. Frankie becomes wholly immersed in Mary Littlejohn’s identity, not her own, which may be a sign of Frankie’s sexuality, or it may be that Frankie is not allowed within her society to be a tomboy any longer. Frankie decides that she is “just mad about Michelangelo” simply because “Mary collected pictures of great masters and pasted them in an art book” (150). Frankie is not invested in art because she personally admires it; she becomes interested in it to be closer to Mary, which may be
representative of her move toward the femininity that Mary represents. Interestingly, "Berenice had spoken of Mary as being lumpy and marshmallow-white. The Littlejohns were Catholics, and even on this point Berenice was all of a sudden narrowminded" (150). Berenice sees the change in Frankie and does not like it. Berenice's voice is the only one telling Frankie to be careful of Mary, but Frankie defends her new friend vehemently: "But for Frances this difference was a final touch of strangeness, silent terror, that completed the wonder of her love" (151). Frances falls for Mary Littlejohn, or perhaps what she represents, and Berenice does not want Frankie to be "caught" either entering a lesbian relationship or losing her own sense of individuality. Frances idolizes Mary and even begins to follow what Mary's mother finds to be the "proper" way to act. When Frankie and Mary go to the annual fair, they are told to stay away from the freak pavilion, because "Mrs. Littlejohn said it was morbid to gaze at Freaks," the same freaks that Frankie identified with at the beginning of the novel.

Frankie's last line in the novel is left unfinished: "I am simply mad about..." (153), and she leaves the story with an unresolved identity. Frankie thinks she is complete because of Mary Littlejohn, but if this relationship fails, she will be left with another disappointment. Frankie wants to sail around the world or go North with Mary, as McCullers did when she was 17, but it is unclear if Frankie will have the confidence to leave Georgia and find her true identity.

The Perishing Southern Tomboy

What does Frankie's story reflect about the white tomboy in the South or in Southern texts? Southern tomboys are unresolved, stifled, left behind, rejected, and relinquished in order to conform. Frankie ignores the Freaks at the pavilion, and ultimately displaces her
own identity. Frankie may conform to society, and under the advisement of Mrs. Littlejohn, become a debutante. In order to become a “we” she may have to lose her individuality—exactly what McCullers found troubling about her own life. It is unlikely that Frankie will go back to her former “tomboyish” lifestyle, which as a young woman in the South would seem “grotesque,” as Halberstam points out. McCullers’s intention may have been to show a lesbian relationship developing between Frankie and Mary, reflecting McCullers’s own attraction to women. Moving from a young white tomboy to a lesbian woman may be one conclusion or resolution to McCullers’s novel, but Frankie does not seem liberated or resolved. She is unable to verbalize her emotions, which is symbolic of Frankie’s immature understanding of herself.

Frankie is representative of a rebellion against becoming a “belle,” yet the progression of tomboys into female adulthood is stunted. Frankie’s unresolved story may represent the slow progression of women in the South during the 1930’s and 1940’s that McCullers was witnessing, both in her own life and from her perspective in the North. Her novel shows the “problems with growing up female in the South” and the struggle to defy a white patriarchal society.
Meridian Hill in Alice Walker’s novel, *Meridian*, published in 1976, also struggles with her identity. Deborah E. McDowell explains that Meridian has a “formidable struggle, for she lives in a society that domesticates conformity, that censures individual expression, especially for women” (168). Meridian’s search for her “self” begins when she is a young girl and continues throughout her adult life. Growing up in Georgia, like Frankie, Meridian has also essentially lived without a mother, because Meridian’s mother was “not a woman who should have had children” (49). Meridian’s mother consistently asks if Meridian has stolen anything, and Meridian feels guilty “for stealing her mother’s serenity, for shattering her mother’s emerging self” (51). Meridian’s sense of guilt about stealing from her mother is ironic, because it is Meridian’s mother who has stolen from her daughter, taking away Meridian’s ability to love herself. As a young girl, Meridian realizes that she is an unwanted child and is not loved whole-heartedly by her mother, a fact that haunts Meridian throughout the book as she, like Frankie, tries to find where she “belongs.”

During her childhood, Meridian spends most of her time helping her father on the farm. Unlike her brothers, she is drawn to the land. After the farm is lost, so is Meridian’s innocence when, at 12 years of age, Daxter and the assistant at a funeral home sexually violate her. Meridian’s first sexual encounter is violent and confusing, making her dislike sex with men from that moment forward. Meridian and Frankie both learn about sex with men while they are 12, although Meridian is raped, while Frankie runs away. Frankie’s ability to run away symbolically reveals a race distinction between Meridian and Frankie; Frankie, a white girl, is able to escape, while Meridian, a black girl, continues to be violated.
When Meridian becomes sexually involved with Eddie in high school, her naïveté about birth control results in an unwanted pregnancy. Meridian does not feel a motherly connection with Eddie Jr., wanting to “scratch him out of her life” (69); she realizes she does not want her child, nor does she want to remain married. She is not in love with Eddie and feels no sexual attraction to him, which she finds confusing, but reassuring once her marriage is over. Eddie soon moves out, and Meridian decides she wants to give Eddie Jr. away and go to college. After Meridian’s mother shows vehement resistance to the idea, Meridian finally enrolls in Saxon College, and leaves home alone. Meridian and Eddie divorce, and Eddie Jr., whom she renames “Rundi, after no person...who has ever lived,” is given away to “people who wanted him” (90), indicating that he was adopted. Meridian refuses her role as a mother and wife, and becomes a student, moving forward as a single woman.

Walker, like McCullers, explores the theme of entrapment of female characters. Meridian is trapped in her marriage and role as a mother, and she wants to escape in order to live on her own. Frankie feels “caught” because she is convinced that she can find happiness only through being “joined” with someone. Meridian is liberated as she moves away from her family to attend college and joins the civil rights movement. Donna Haisty-Winchell recognizes the difference between Meridian and her mother, in that “unlike her mother and a long line of mothers before her, Meridian lives in an age of choice. She chooses a college education over the motherhood that she feels unsuited for, taking advantage of a scholarship to Saxon College” (62). Walker makes Meridian a woman who is not going to fall into a role set up for her by her mother or by a white society; she will not feel “caught,” which is how her mother felt when she became a mother (50). Although she faces resistance, Meridian strives to find herself, her own identity outside of “mother” and “wife,” as well as “black woman.”
Once at Saxon, Meridian quickly recognizes the climate of patriarchal bureaucracy that pervades the college, and she finds herself "caught" again, and "in fact, Meridian and the other students felt they had two enemies: Saxon, which wanted them to become something--ladies--that was already obsolete, and the larger, more deadly enemy, white racist society" (95). This "enemy" leads to a sort of "death" and "re-birth" for Meridian, as she begins to physically deteriorate, losing her hair, and her body wastes away from her "illness." She begins to feel that her body stands in the way of reconciling with her mother; subsequently Meridian "valued her body less, attended to it less, because she hated its obstruction" (97). Meridian becomes silent, which may be because of her time at Saxon college. Lynn Pifer sees Saxon as detrimental, because it is an institution that "seeks to separate its students from their folk community by forcing them to follow a notion of proper behavior that is merely a careful imitation of the white middle class" (83). In order to gain inner strength and self-actualization, Meridian endures great physical and emotional pain. Meridian feels trapped within her own body, unable to find comfort inside herself, and begins to look for reassurance in a man. Like Frankie, Meridian searches for herself through another person, a "we of me."

Meridian and Frankie: Sexuality and Identity

Meridian meets Truman Held, and falls in love with him, although he later falls in love with and marries Lynne Rabinowitz, a white woman. Although Meridian feels sexual attraction for Truman, sex with Truman is not fulfilling, because he ejaculates and falls asleep before she is able to climax, leaving her unsatisfied and pregnant. Walker does not describe sex between Meridian and Truman in terms of beauty, but instead with words like "distorted" when Meridian sees Truman's genitalia, and "contorted" when describing
Truman's face. The encounter itself is described as “fucking,” which inherently shows aggression, not a loving or compassionate experience. Meridian also only knows one form of contraception, the condom, showing her continued naïveté about sex.

After this sexual encounter, Truman returns to Lynne, a college exchange student at this time in the novel. Meridian has an abortion, and her white doctor performs a hysterectomy, asking Meridian as payment to “let [him] in on some of all this extracurricular activity” (115). Again, Meridian is violated, and again sexual experience is shown as a perverse proposition. Meridian leaves the office bleeding and alone, and this horrific scene is aggravated when she sees Truman who asks her to “have [his] beautiful black babies” (116). Meridian’s aggressive reaction, hitting him with her bag to the point of drawing blood, is comparable to Frankie wanting to stab Barney MacKean, as well as knocking the soldier out with the pitcher. Meridian’s encounter with Truman seems to be an adult version of Frankie’s encounter with the soldier, and they both end in the same way, with violation and isolation. Meridian admits “sex was always fraught with ugly consequences for her” (142), and Frankie similarly reveals “the sin [with Barney] made a shriveling sickness in her stomach” (23). Frankie and Meridian are both naïve about sex, and when faced with it, they find it revolting and painful.

Sexuality is central to Meridian and Frankie’s identity. Their experiences with heterosexual sex are disturbing, violent, and isolating. The characters grapple with their sexual identity, yet it is not entirely apparent to the reader if Frankie and Meridian are indeed lesbian or bisexual women. There is a definite ambivalence in both texts about the true sexual orientation of these women, although it is implied. A critical reader is comfortable with labeling Frankie as a lesbian, because of all of the author’s clues; i.e., Frankie wishes people could change back and forth from boys to girls whenever they want, and she falls for
Mary Littlejohn. Meridian’s sexuality is a bit more difficult to define, although her crush on Anne-Marion, as well as all of her horrific experiences with men, may be a clue to her sexual preference.

Anne-Marion takes care of Meridian while she is ill, as well as becoming her closest friend. Mrs. Winter also helps Meridian through the pain of Meridian’s guilt about her mother, acting as Mrs. Hill while Meridian hallucinates during her illness. Sadly Anne-Marion leaves Meridian with a painful goodbye, telling Meridian, “I cannot afford to love you. Like the idea of suffering itself, you are obsolete” (125). They continue to keep in touch through letters, which Meridian keeps throughout her life, because “they contain the bitch’s handwriting” (32), seeming to show that Meridian loved Anne-Marion romantically, instead of just as a female friend. Meridian has a close female relationship with Anne-Marion, suggesting a lesbian relationship, and finds no solace in heterosexual relationships. After Anne-Marion leaves, Meridian seems to become asexual, finding love solely in herself and her culture. She is not paired with anyone, man or woman, at the end of the novel; she is more interested in loving herself, which she has found difficult throughout her life.

**Meridian’s Masculinity**

After losing Anne-Marion Meridian gains perspective about her relationship with Truman, realizing that he never loved her, which she tells him. Truman realizes his loss, but remains married to Lynne, although their relationship has become a friendly arrangement, not a loving marriage. Meridian seemingly begins to “find herself” at this point in the novel, which is accompanied by her transforming physically into a masculine character, cutting the rest of her hair off and donning an engineer’s cap, in which “she did not look out of place. In
Deborah A. McDowell explains the significance of Meridian’s need to take on masculine characteristics:

'It is not incidental that her physical features in this chapter most resemble a male’s’ [...] The fact that she is physically unattractive does not concern Meridian, an unconcern contrary to conventional notions of womanhood. Not only does Meridian look like a male, but she also acts like one. She is decidedly out of her ‘place’ as a woman in her demonstration of unwavering leadership qualities, those generally associated with a male. Thus a symbolic inversion of roles occurs in this scene and Meridian can be said to triumph over tradition and authority.' (170)

Meridian’s sexuality is displaced at this point in the novel; her passion is applied to the Movement and discovering her place within black culture. Her new masculine identity is accompanied by a realization about her heritage, and “that the respect she owed her life was to continue, against whatever obstacles, to live it, and not to give up any particle of it without a fight to the death, preferably not her own. And that this existence extended beyond herself to those around her because, in fact, the years in America had created them One Life” (200). This new understanding allows Meridian to further contemplate the act of killing for the freedom of future generations, something she struggles with throughout the course of her work within the Movement: “I have been allowed to see how the new capacity to do anything, including kill, for our freedom--beyond sporadic acts of violence--is to emerge, and flower, but I am not yet at the point of being able to kill anyone myself, nor will ever be” (200). Meridian understands the urge to want to kill for freedom, but knows that she, being part of “one life,” is unable to do so. Her rage about racism is used to motivate her, and her identity becomes immersed in her culture, which provides her with strength. Meridian exits the novel by “releasing” her past identity. She is no longer ill and has no guilt or shame,
because “she was strong enough to go and owned nothing to pack” (219). At the close of the novel, Meridian has let go of her emotional “baggage;” as Marie H. Buncombe states, “finally knowing who and what she is ... she was truly born again” (426). As Meridian leaves, she takes her heritage with her; she is not alone. Meridian leaves her cap behind with Truman, who worries about her being alone. Ironically, it is Truman who fears being alone, as he “climbed shakily into Meridian’s sleeping bag” (220). Truman puts on Meridian’s hat and tries to take on her identity as his own to find comfort in her leaving.

The end of *Meridian* reflects Walker’s views on “joining” the fight in order to exist. Meridian’s identity is part of the Movement and her ancestry, past, present, and future. She walks away, finding her “value” that is not connected to Lynne or Truman, but to her heritage and the fight for freedom. Meridian’s ending is a “release” from her painful past into a future as a strong black woman. Meridian’s future is connected to Walker’s womanist stance that includes being “responsible, in charge, and serious,” all attributes Meridian has acquired (*In Search* xi). Meridian finds herself, and she has to step out of the role of being “Truman’s Meridian” into being her own person with individual convictions that help her entire race: “Thus, the self has bloomed; Meridian has found her identity, an identity fashioned not from Western tradition, but rather from the artifacts of her own heritage” (McDowell 176). It is here that Meridian’s identity as a black masculine female far surpasses that of the white tomboy in Southern fiction. Buncombe elaborates on Meridian’s “bloomed self”:

Meridian finds her true self only when she sheds the old stereotypes. She sloughed off the superimposed roles of long-suffering, supportive wife and black matriarch; of the black woman scorned by the black man for a white woman; of the white-gloved black lady outfitted for a white racist society. Stripped of all the accoutrements of the clichéd images of the black woman ...
she, from all outward appearances, is indistinguishable from a man. The androgynous look symbolizes her freedom from a past of hypocrisy and ignorance, of shibboleths and inhibitions. (426)

It is even more important that by the end of the novel Meridian does not need the cap or the overalls to indicate her “self.” Her “soft wool of newly grown hair” (219) indicates her growth as a black woman; her genuine, true self is put forward. She no longer has “inhibitions”; instead she has convictions.

**Walker’s Exploration of the Self**

Walker’s life experiences as a young black girl and as an adult woman are depicted throughout this novel. Like McCullers, Walker takes pieces of her own history and attaches them to Meridian. However, Walker’s life was plagued with racism as well as sexism, causing her to fight for freedom on two levels: as a female and as a black female. Walker’s work and life center around her womanist stance and her place within her culture, which are reflected in *Meridian*. Walker’s troubled past in the South, much like McCullers’s, contributed to her writing, as she states:

[I do not] intend to romanticize the Southern black country life. I can recall that I hated it, generally. The hard work in the fields, the shabby houses, the evil greedy men who worked my father to death and almost broke the courage of that strong woman, my mother. No, I am simply saying that Southern black writers, like most writers, have a heritage of love and hate, but that they also have enormous richness and beauty to draw from. (*In Search* 21)

Walker was born on February 9, 1944 in Eatonville, Georgia, the eighth child of Willie Lee and Minnie (Grant) Walker, both sharecroppers. When Walker was eight years old, her brother shot her with a B. B. gun, causing her right eye to be blinded and scarred. Due to her injury, Walker suffered extreme misery and isolation throughout her young years. Like
McCullers, Walker felt like an outcast at school. Because of Walker’s scar, children called her names like “one eyed bitch” and refused to be her friend (In Search 189). At age 14, Walker’s “favorite” brother Bill took her to a doctor in Boston to remove some of the scar tissue, which made a considerable difference in Walker’s appearance. After spending several years suffering isolation and torment from other students, Walker succeeded in graduating from high school as class valedictorian in 1961.

Alice and Meridian: Revolutionary Women

Walker attributes her “solitary” demeanor to this period of time in her young life: “I believe…that it was from this period—from…my position of an outcast—that I began to really see people and things. I no longer felt like the little girl I was. I felt old, and because I felt I was unpleasant to look at, filled with shame, I retreated into solitude, and read stories and…wrote poems” (O’Brien 327). This sense of shame relates to Meridian when she recognizes that she has stolen her mother’s independence, which forces Meridian to rely on herself, making her feel extremely isolated. Walker attended Spelman College, which is seemingly referred to as Saxon in Meridian, where she became involved in the Civil Rights Movement. Walker realized that she did not belong at Spelman because, like Saxon, it was too conservative, which is why Walker left Spelman after two years. However, the experience at Spelman College made Walker begin to question her identity, which she later expressed in an essay written in 1971 when she wrote, “I have not labeled myself yet. I would like to call myself a revolutionary, for I am always changing, and growing, it is hoped for the good of more black people” (In Search 133).

It was also at Spelman that Walker began seriously to contemplate suicide. Walker’s desperation peaked after returning from Africa where she spent the summer of 1964, because
she was impoverished, sick, and pregnant. She planned to kill herself, keeping a razor blade underneath her pillow. Walker wanted an abortion, although she could not find an abortionist. She also felt ashamed because her mother considered abortion a sin. After attempts to contact her family for support, she was ignored by one sister and called a "slut" by the other (O’Brien 328). For three days, Walker lay alone in misery, hallucinating, and thinking about suicide, "In those three days, I said goodbye to the world. I realized how much I loved it. I was not afraid of death. In a way, I began looking forward to it" (329). Walker was saved by one of her friends who called and said she had found an abortionist.

Aspects of Walker’s pregnancy and abortion are included in Meridian, as are the hallucinations brought on by illness. Additionally, Walker and Meridian both found their way out of misery and pain in order to find their true “self.” Walker graduated from Sarah Lawrence College with her B.A. in 1965 and became deeply immersed in the Civil Rights Movement in Georgia and Mississippi. Walker includes her personal experiences in the Movement, such as voter registration and campaigning for welfare rights, within Meridian. Walker’s personal epiphany about her role in her culture is also visible in the novel, as she points out in an essay written in 1967: “Part of what existence means to me is knowing the difference between what I am now and what I was then ... It means being part of the world community, and being alert to which part it is that I have joined. To know is to exist: to exist is to be involved, to move about, to see the world with my own eyes. This, at least, is what the Movement has given me” (In Search 126).

**Meridian and Frankie: Symbols and Freaks**

Frankie Addams and Meridian Hill are interconnected in several ways, one being their image as “tomboys.” Frankie begins the book as a tomboy, entering puberty feeling
“freakish.” Meridian enters the novel feeling isolated because her mother did not love her, and because of her lack of self-awareness. Symbols that represent their isolation, particularly freakish or grotesque images, appear in both *Meridian* and *The Member of the Wedding*. At the beginning of McCullers’s novel, Frankie reminisces about the Chattahoochee Exhibition that came to her town, which included the “House of Freaks,” where “it cost a quarter to go into the general tent, and you could look at each Freak in his booth ... Frankie had seen all of the members of the Freak House last October: The Giant/ The Fat Lady/ The Midget/ The Wild Nigger/ The Pin Head/ The Alligator Boy/ The Half Man-Half Woman” (17). Frankie feels connected with the freaks, especially “The Giant,” as she is a tall girl in the midst of puberty. Similarly, Meridian witnesses a circus exhibition, including a mummified woman named Marilene O’Shay who was killed by her husband for committing adultery. O’Shay’s title consists of “One of the Twelve Human Wonders of the World: Dead for Twenty-Five Years, Preserved in Life-Like Condition” (19). Underneath O’Shay’s title are etched the descriptors: “Obedient Daughter,” “Devoted Wife,” “Adoring Mother,” and finally “Gone Wrong” (19). Clearly these descriptors are representative of Meridian’s shame and guilt that she carries throughout the novel. Although Meridian rebels against the prototype of “black woman” and “mother,” she still views herself as somewhat “freakish” or “grotesque.” However, if Meridian had taken on motherhood and marriage, she would have been “dead” to herself, hence mummified.

Meridian also comes in contact with the “Wild Child,” an orphan girl who is pregnant at age 13. Meridian tries to “mother” the Wild Child by taking her into her dorm room, but she is soon persuaded by the house-mother to get rid of her and told to “think of the influence. This is a school for young ladies” (37). The Wild Child is killed when she runs out into the street and is hit by a car, and the president of Saxon refuses to allow her a proper
funeral in the college chapel. The Wild Child represents a part of Meridian, her muted or unknown self, and her story is paired with the legend of the Sojourner Tree that grew from the slave Louvinie’s severed tongue. The tree represents Meridian’s literal “branching out” as she frees herself from silence throughout the novel and flourishes in her “new” identity that is linked with her culture.

Meridian’s name, a symbolic representation throughout the book, seems wholly evident when she evolves into a more masculine character at the end of the novel. At this point in the novel, Meridian is centered or at her “highest point,” an interesting juxtaposition to Frankie’s struggle, which is ultimately unresolved. Finding her “self” after a lifetime of self-loathing and torment uplifts Meridian. Frankie does not achieve the same sort of understanding, and at the age of 13, she continues to search for a place to belong. Meridian finds her “place” and transforms into a leader in the Civil Rights Movement, a confidant and advisor for both Truman and Lynne, but most importantly she becomes part of her cultural heritage or “one life.” As Meridian discovers her place within her ancestry, she recognizes that in her isolation she is connected to those who also feel alone, telling Truman that “all the people who are as alone as I am will one day gather at the river. We will watch the evening sun go down. And in the darkness maybe we will know the truth” (220). As Meridian exits the book, she also leaves Truman behind, moving on to join with “all the rest of them” (220). Meridian does not need her engineer’s cap or Truman to represent who she is anymore. She has become her own leader, and joined in a life that includes those before and after her in her fight for freedom.

The difference between symbolic references in Meridian and The Member of the Wedding is that Meridian is represented as growing and raising herself out of isolation and silence, while Frankie limits herself in an identity that does not “fit.” The organdy dress that
Frankie insists on wearing to the wedding has to be entirely altered to fit her body, and even then it looks silly because it is an adult woman’s evening gown. The gown represents an outdated representation of femininity; the dress makes Frankie look “freakish.” Meridian denies femininity, and instead of wearing a gown, wears a striped engineer’s cap, which makes her look as though she “belongs.”

Frankie’s stealing and running away shows rebellious nature; however, these acts do not further her role in society. For Meridian, being arrested is for a cause, the Civil Rights Movement, and she goes to jail willingly alongside others fighting for freedom from oppression. Frankie tries to step out of the role of “belle” by being a tomboy and rebelling against her father by taking his gun. However at the end of the novel, she resorts to displacing her identity by adopting Mary Littlejohn’s personality and interests. Furthermore, music plays through both of these novels, and in *Meridian*, songs like “We Shall Overcome” show the tie to her role in the Movement. Music in *The Member of the Wedding* is often unfinished and discordant, representing the main contrast between Meridian and Frankie: Frankie’s story is unfinished because she is still a young girl, while Meridian is self-actualized as an adult woman. Frankie is isolated and confused; she has not found herself, but even if she does, it seems her life may still be filled with conflict, much like McCullers and her own experience as a bisexual white female. Masculinity in *Meridian* is symbolic of black women rising out of an oppressive South, celebrating their heritage. Frankie’s “tomboyism” may be linked to McCullers revealing a faction of Southern women who cannot fit into the “belle” role, which is oppressive in vastly different ways than race discrimination, but powerful and encroaching, nonetheless. Frankie and Meridian represent women fighting for their identity in a society that wants to control them. The symbolic
references in the book are similar, and show that to fight for freedom is viewed as “freakish,” because of society’s predetermined roles for women and minorities.

**Meridian’s Conclusion**

Meridian Hill’s character triumphs, rising out of misery and shame. Finding her place within her culture enables her to find value in herself and in life. However, Meridian’s fight for freedom from prejudice or sexism is not over. She will face opposition many times throughout her life, but she has learned to stand against it; Meridian has learned to fight for herself and her heritage. Walker tells us that “black women are called, in the folklore that so aptly identifies one’s status in society, ‘the mule of the world,’ because we have been handed the burdens that everyone else—everyone else—refused to carry” (In Search 237). The “burden” that Meridian has as the book concludes is something she is willing and able to carry. Her activism in the Movement lets her reach past herself to something larger. Walker ends the novel with Meridian “going off into the sunset” by herself, no matter how difficult her journey may be. The resolution to the novel is uplifting and inspirational, making the reader recognize that Meridian Hill has reached her “highest point,” because she is dedicated to her people, including herself. *Meridian* explores one woman’s quest to find her identity, which includes defying societal expectations of what it means to be a “black woman.” Meridian’s evolved masculinity exhibits her defiance and strength.
CONCLUSION
A Matter of Rebellion

Why are Meridian Hill and Frankie Addams important characters in Southern fiction? The answer relates to why McCullers and Walker are influential in Southern women’s literature. Feminists and womanists have carved a niche in Southern women’s literature in an attempt to deconstruct patriarchy, matriarchy, and racism. As Linda Tate maintains, “[S]outhern women’s fiction in its most recent phase suggests that these women are questioning the roles assigned to them and are actively redefining their position in the South” (177). This questioning is enacted through the inclusion of tomboys and masculine women characters in Southern novels. Femininity is displaced or is questioned as a social construction as masculine females emerge in the canon, which has evolved over time in Southern fiction. It is obvious that Walker’s Meridian, written 30 years after The Member of the Wedding, reflects a critical progression toward selfhood that did not occur in McCullers’s novel. The key difference between Frankie and Meridian’s rebellion is that McCullers only identifies a problem in her novel: the pressure to become a “belle” in the South versus the identity of the tomboy. Frankie does not move into adulthood, and the book does not move past the problem of conformity. In fact, at the conclusion of the novel, Frankie is still a confused young girl.

McCullers’s Frankie has not completed her journey into adulthood, although she does surpass the antiquated version of adolescent females in literature. Most white female child protagonists previous to and during the early 1900’s were not portrayed as independent thinkers. Barbara White points out that “not only do our early [American] novelists lack any conception of female adolescence, but they also tend to ignore the years from eleven to
sixteen or seventeen” (21). White expresses that nineteenth-century authors “usually present the female protagonist as either child or adult” (21), and uses Little Women as one example that forces young girls into womanhood, hence the title’s denotation of young girls being “little women.” This rapid maturation of female characters in texts disallowed adolescent girls from having their own voices in novels and forced them to be prematurely labeled “women.” As White points out, young girls throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century are ruled by “moral lessons” and patriarchy, until they “form” into “acceptable” and “proper” adult women. What is exceptional about McCullers’s novel is that she lets the reader see Frankie’s point of view as she struggles through puberty, which includes Frankie’s confusion about her sexuality. Frankie questions her identity, and like Meridian she endures pain through difficult experiences involving abandonment, love, and sex. Frankie feels isolated throughout most of the book, and McCullers allows the story to be awkwardly unfinished. McCullers does not reveal the “proper” ending to Frankie’s adolescence, and Frankie has not reached adulthood yet. Frankie’s ending is unresolved, but it is far more advanced than earlier young white female heroines.

Walker moves beyond simply identifying problems like racism and sexism, and reveals a young black girl evolving into an adult black woman who suffers emotional and physical pain in discovering her identity. While Frankie’s tomboyism represents confusion, Meridian’s masculinity represents a serious, true self. Frankie is not mature enough to understand whom or what she is trying to defy, while Meridian’s life experiences allow her to clearly identify her adversaries as well as her allies. Walker shows Meridian fighting against becoming a “lady” at Saxon, a place that represents white patriarchy. Walker employs Meridian to expose stereotypes forced upon black women, as well as white. When Meridian contemplates white women’s identity, she remembers what her grandmother and
mother passed down to her, including the “facts” that white women “were frivolous, helpless creatures, lazy, and without ingenuity. White women were useless except as baby machines which would continue to produce white people who would grow up to oppress her” (108). The racial line between white and black women is clear, and for Meridian white women represent an injurious “other.” Additionally, the image of the white belle is exposed as absurd in *Meridian* through Truman’s blonde lover whom Lynne refers to as “Scarlet”: “And then the girl’s words, melodious as song, southerly as trade winds, came softly out, like the bewildered mewling of a cat” (170-71). Lynne, who is white but from the North, and Meridian both realize that Truman is using this girl for sexual pleasure, and Walker portrays this belle figure as foolish, hence “bewildered.” Women who are not “serious,” as Walker’s womanist theology dictates, are portrayed as frivolous.

Finally, Walker exposes the way that black men oppress black women when Meridian realizes that “Truman would have liked her better as she had been as Eddie’s wife... an attractive woman, but asleep” (110). After several painful experiences, including aborting Truman’s child, Meridian understands that Truman is not helping her to evolve. Meridian finally grasps that she has to acquire her own persona, one that is resilient against all forces. Eventually, Truman does recognize Meridian’s strength as admirable, and he wants her to take him back, but Meridian knows she must remain by herself in order to preserve her identity. Meridian rises above all stereotypes and oppression; she fights back for herself. Meridian’s evolution in the novel represents her moving away from being misinformed to becoming a revolutionary activist, which involves bucking the social system.

It is reasonable to consider the McCullers and Walker as speaking through their characters. Many critics believe both of these texts are autobiographical, as McCullers explores her frustration with the South and recounts coming to an understanding of her own
sexual identity through Frankie. Likewise, Walker seemingly retells parts of her life through Meridian. Both authors work to dispel any notions of traditional females; however, McCullers’s and Walker’s ancestral “traditions” are entirely separated by race. Walker writes as a way to expose the degradation, as well as the triumph of black women. She recognizes the need to move past the characterization of black women that, historically, has been an integral part of Southern writing, which she attributes to white male social construction: “No wonder ‘black’ nineteenth-century heroines seem so weak and boring! They are prisoners of a fatal social vision. Their destination—total extinction as blacks within, at most, two generations—is preordained” (In Search 310). Walker’s character Meridian moves far beyond the reach of nineteenth-century characterization, moving to the other end of the gender/race spectrum by adopting a masculine persona.

Walker is motivated to write because, “as black women, we have been poorly prepared to cherish what should matter most to us. Our models in literature and life have been, for the most part, devastating…perhaps we can learn something, even from the discouraging models of earlier centuries of our own time” (311). It is apparent that Walker has learned “something” and illustrates her knowledge through her black female characters like Meridian. Meridian Hill is not just one black woman searching for understanding; she is an “apex” of strength and resolution in a racially oppressive society that demeans black women. Meridian Hill has to become a pseudo-man to break the barriers of social expectation, and by the end of the novel, she is simply Meridian. Her sexuality does not define her; her journey to the center of herself and her culture makes her whole.

It is evident that Frankie is “caught” in a culture that will not accept a tomboy beyond childhood, which even Berenice points out: “What you ought to begin thinking about is a beau… a nice little white boy beau” (77). Frankie is “supposed” to be interested in boys, and
when she says, “I don’t want any beau. What would I do with one?” (77), it is entirely obvious that Frankie has no understanding of carrying out a feminine role, even if society indicates that she should be developing into a “proper” young woman. As Halberstam points out, adult female masculinity has long been considered unacceptable. Southern tradition in the 1940’s deemed Frankie’s masculinity wholly unacceptable, as when Mrs. Littlejohn tells the girls not to visit the Freak Pavilion at the fair, because it was “morbid to gaze at Freaks” (152). Ultimately, Frankie gives up her masculinity and adopts Mary’s personality; however, McCullers continues to present femininity as silly and trivial as Frankie cuts up sandwiches at the end of the book. It is unclear if Frankie will maintain a feminine façade in order to fit into Southern culture, and it is also unknown if Frankie is forming a relationship with Mary because Frankie is a lesbian. Frankie appears to be naively unaware of her fate as well, which is realistic at her age.

When McCullers left the South at age 18 to become a writer, she decided that she would not succumb to the pressure to abide by a set of cultural rules set up for women, and she “did not inherit a sense of [Southern] tradition, and the record she left indicates she did not attempt to embrace any tradition” (Presley 110). Her painful years of isolation growing up in the South inspired her to write her fiction, which oftentimes included a confused tomboy who was not accepted by her community. Frankie Addams provided McCullers a way to rebel against belledom, and Frankie exposed the pressure applied to young girls to conform to societal norms. In this way, the masculine females in McCullers’s and Walker’s novels attempt an united undertaking as they rebel against the norm in order to expose a history of social oppression of women in the South.

The most significant connection between these authors is that they use their characters to reveal truths about growing up female in the South. “Belles,” “ladies,” and
socially oppressed black women have been replaced by women who are questioning these prescribed roles and searching for a “self” that is their own. Yet, there are obvious differences between the characters, because Meridian is far more self-actualized at the end of *Meridian* than Frankie is at the end of *The Member of the Wedding*. Meridian leaves the novel to venture forward on her own, realizing her new role within her culture. Frankie departs with a crush on Mary, and Frankie has not yet found a true sense of independence within herself. She is still relying on others, Mary Littlejohn in this case, to make her feel “joined.” Frankie has found happiness only through another person, while Meridian is self-empowered. One component of Walker’s definition of a “womanist” represents the difference between the way that McCullers portrays Frankie and Walker portrays Meridian: “Womanist is to Feminist as purple is to lavender” (*In Search* xii). Walker’s character surpasses naïveté and reaches self-actualization. It is questionable if Frankie will develop into a white version of Meridian, or if Frankie will continue searching for the “we of me,” while Meridian celebrates “one life.” Either way, it is obvious that masculine female characters in Southern literature make a definitive statement across racial lines, defying society’s constructed definitions for women. McCullers and Walker destroy any “ground rules” prescribed by Southern society for black and white women, making Frankie and Meridian wholly “joined” in their rebellion.
NOTES

1 masculine \(\text{\textit{mas-ky-l\textendash\textendash-l\textendash\textendash-n}}\) \textit{adj} [ME \textit{masculin}, fr. MF, fr. L \textit{masculinus}, fr. \textit{Masculus}, n., male, dim. Of \textit{mas} male] [14 c] 1 a: MALE b: having qualities appropriate to a man 2: of, relating to, or constituting the gender that ordinarily includes most words or grammatical forms referring to males 3 a: having or occurring in a stressed final syllable (~rhythm) b: having the final chord occurring on a strong beat (~cadence) 4: of or forming the formal, active, or generative principle of the cosmos-masculinely \textit{adv}-masculinity \textit{n} (Webster, 730).

2 tomboy \(\text{\textit{t\textendash\textendashm\textendash-boi}}\) \textit{n} (1592): a girl of boyish behavior: HOYDEN (Webster, 1241).

3 Womanist. From \textit{womanish} (Opp. of “girlish,” i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or womanist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “You acting womanish,” i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or \textit{willful} behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “You trying to be grown.” Responsible. In charge. \textit{Serious}.

2. Also: A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture, women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural counterbalance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally universalist, as in “Mama why are we brown, pink, and yellow, and our cousins are white, beige, and black?” Ans.: “Well, you know the colored race is just like a flower garden, with every color flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “Mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “It wouldn’t be the first time.”


4. Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender (Walker, \textit{In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens}, xi).

Fannie Lou Hamer and other women in the civil rights movement are reflected in Walker’s book \textit{Meridian}. Hamer became an integral part of the movement, beginning in a Grassroots movement with little understanding of politics. However, she risked her life several times to fight for freedom, and in 1962, she worked with the SCLC and SNCC where she began mobilizing other people in the movement. She became vice chairperson of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and spoke out about civil rights, which led to a savage beating in 1963 that almost killed her, negatively affecting her health for the rest of her life. She died in 1977 at the age of 59. Hamer did not fight for equality, but liberation: “I couldn’t tell nobody with my head up I’m fighting for equal right with a white man, because I don’t want it. Because if what I get, got to come through lynching, mobbing, raping, murdering, stealing, and killing, I don’t want it, because it was such a shocking thing to me I couldn’t
hardly sit down” (Grant, 43). It is important to understand the historical and political ties to women like Hamer in order to understand Walker’s text.

This is never stated in the book, but hints in the text reveal it: “[H]is face was pale as cheese this morning, his eyes had a pink and ragged look. It was a morning when he despised a saucer because his cup would rattle against it and not fit...” (46). McCullers had experience with alcoholism in her own life. Her grandfather was an alcoholic, and she was named after his wife Lula, her grandmother. Reeves McCullers also suffered from bouts of alcoholism in which he became violent or withdrawn. McCullers herself drank sherry quite a bit. Pictures in Carr’s biography show her on the Yaddo grounds with a thermos of sherry tea, which “she frequently carried about with her” (243).

It seems possible that McCullers may have been hinting at incest within the novel, but she does not reveal if this is true or not. It does not seem like it may have happened, but perhaps Frankie’s father was worried that he may be attracted to her since she was becoming a young woman, not a little girl.

This horrible experience urged Walker to write continuously, and she completed her book of poems entitled Once during this time.

Walker says that she saw one of her friends appear to her as she hallucinated: “The face of one of my friends revealed itself to be the friendly, gentle face of a lion, and I asked her one day if I could touch her face and stroke her mane...I began to feel the possibility of someone as worthless as myself attaining wisdom” (O’Brien, 329). In Meridian, Meridian Hill sees Miss Winter as being her mother, Mrs. Hill, and asks for forgiveness. After this hallucination, Meridian begins to recover from her “illness.”

Meridian notices a group of black children that want to see the exhibit, and because it is “white only” day, they are restricted from it. Meridian, although she knows the exhibit is horrible and bogus, takes the children to see the woman out of protest for the outdated Jim Crow law.
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