Chapter III


B) Dreams of Girlhood: Breaking Boundaries - A Study of Carson McCullers’: *The Member of the Wedding* (1946)

Adolescence is certainly one of the most difficult and interesting stages in the progress of human life. Adolescence is not a clear denotation of any age, body, behavior, or identity, because it has always meant the process of developing a self rather than any definition of that self. “However if adolescence has never concretely specified an age range, it has been gendered and sexed.”¹ In the case of adolescent girls, there are even more complex transformations and traumas both on the physical and on the psychological level. In the quotation by Lillian Schlissel cited in the introduction, about the patterns relating to the nature of male adolescence she also says, “We have still to discover the patterns of experience that hold true for women” (p.258).

While the rebellion of “angry young men” is justified because society does not provide them with worthwhile goals, there are claims that the question of “how to be useful and make something of oneself does not apply to girls. A girl does not have to; she is not expected to make something of herself. Her career does not have to be self-justifying, for she will have children, which is absolutely self-justifying, like any
other natural or creative act."² In order to have a clearer idea of the
different meaning adolescence assumes respectively for boys and for
girls, a perceptive comment by Simone de Beauvoir's *Le Deuxième Sexe*
(*The Second Sex*, 1949) — the so-called Bible of Feminism is to be noted:

The universe does not wear a similar aspect for the
adolescent boy who is permitted to give imperious notice of
his existence and for the adolescent girl whose sentiments
have no immediate effectiveness. The one constantly
questions the world; he can, at any moment, rise up against
whatever is . . . The other simply submits; the world is
defined without reference to her, and its aspect is immutable
as far as she is concerned.³

The expected norm of behavior of an adolescent girl is therefore —
as assessed by Beauvoir to be — obedience, submission, passivity, simply
because she is not going to master the world as a boy imagines to do. In
women’s writing the self is particularly problematic, not only because
women writers have had to construct their own versions of femininity in
opposition to generations of male portraits but because women’s roles
and circumstances continue to change radically. “Instead of settling for
being a warped half of a person, which is the equivalent to a self-
destructive non-person, the emerging woman is casting off role
definitions and moving toward androgynous being.”⁴ Although most
women novelists address similar preoccupations in their writings they
employ vastly different discursive strategies. They may tell similar
stories, but the form, vision, and tone with which they approach their
objective reflect the heterogeneity that exists in their novels. Evidence of this difference arises when we compare changes, which take place in the protagonists' from their initial disillusionment to a final sort of resolution in Sandra Cisneros *The House on Mango Street* and Carson McCullers *The Member of the Wedding*. Both works tell of the losses and hardships in the lives of the female characters, and how these women find the strength to survive. They struggle to find meaning and validation, and succeed on two levels: first, as a single individual who was able to survive; and second, as a representative narrative that exemplifies the struggle of many American women against racial and sexual oppression.

Like the theme of survival, the theme of self-discovery is very prominent in American literature. In fact, it can be argued that self-discovery turns out to be the overriding theme in both these works.

In this chapter the term ‘feminine adolescence’ has been used with a degree of independence from any specific age category. The girls who are called adolescent here are not necessarily teenagers rather; they are defined as in transition or in process. By choosing an adolescent girl as heroine — and thence, as the main view point — these woman authors succeed in emphasizing the perennial contrast between individual ambitions and social rules, between the young woman’s dreams and the drab necessities of collective life — be it family or society at large. One
notices different reactions of young girls to the rules imposed upon their lives as adults, while confronting the strictures of society; (particularly harsh on women) these young heroines try and define their own personalities.

In contrast to the masculine version of Bildungsroman in which the male’s journey is usually external, the female journey is largely an internal experience of brief moments of epiphany or “flashes of recognition.”

According to Rita Felski, this type of novel “emphasizes spatial and symbolic patterns rather than temporal and open-ended dimension of narrative; it is mythical rather than historical.” It is precisely because the female protagonist’s search is inward, and her awakening is a result of changed consciousness, that her voyage is symbolic. The chapter will concentrate on particular pivotal moments in the lives connected to maturation and self-discovery. In contrast to the Bildungsroman, in which the male leaves home to ‘slay the dragons,’ the female on a journey of self-discovery seeks surroundings that are not a threat to her: “a place that echoes rather than threatens her sense of self” (Felski, p.135). Cisneros and McCullers thus keep their heroines in a female space and, by ascribing to it immense importance, these authors have cleverly inverted another masculine prerogative. The home/kitchen becomes the hub for the action in the novels. In *The Female Novel of*
Development and the Myth of Psyche, Mary Anne Ferguson emphasizes the fact that the male hero retains a sense of integrity and dignity, although as a learner he may have appeared foolish. His adventures send him out into society, and by the end of his journey he is able to look back on his exploits with an ironic gaze. The female character is, however, initiated “at home through learning the rituals of human relationships.” However, both the male and female authors share in the belief that there is “a coherent self, faith in the possibility of development, insistence on a time span in which development occurs, and emphasis on social context.” The sterile and airless feminine space —‘vicious cycles’ — is transformed into new open structure for survival, a space of her own, of wisdom, of personal growth, and of creativity.

According to Felski, the major problem faced by women is generally attributed to socially constructed gender roles: “the starting problem posed is invariably that of the restrictive nature of female social roles” (133). Reflecting the diversity of authors, genres, themes, and techniques in this postmodern era, contemporary women’s writing in America takes many forms. Often feminine writing, in an attempt to counter the dominant patriarchal voice, appropriates, and then reformulates a traditional male genre from the perspective of the marginalized female.
As seen in *The House on Mango Street* (1984), Mexican author Sandra Cisneros borrows from the general configurations of the traditional Bildungsroman (a journey that traces the protagonist’s path toward self-fulfillment) and applies them to her own novel. The principal technique employed by Cisneros to subvert the masculine genre of Bildungsroman in order to present it as a feminine novel of self-discovery is parody, one of the dominant characteristics of Latino feminine writing of recent years. Cisneros challenges the conventions of the Bildungsroman by weaving Esperanza’s quest for selfhood into the fabric of the community. Such a dual focus is usual in Cisneros’s works, in which a multiplicity of voices illustrates the ways the individual engages in the discourses and social practices of Chicano culture. Additionally, by focusing on the ‘socialization’ processes of the female in Chicano culture, Cisneros explores racism in the dominant culture as well as patriarchal oppression in the Latino community.

*The House on Mango Street* and *The Member of the Wedding* belong to the rubric of the female Bildungsroman enunciated by Ellen Morgan as a form:

Admirably suited to express the emergence of women from cultural conditioning into struggle with institutional forces, their progress toward the goals of full personhood, and the effort to restructure their lives, and society according to their own visions of meaning and right living.
In order to understand why *The House on Mango Street* fits so well in the category of the female Bildungsroman, one must define the paradigm and get an understanding of what makes up this focused sub-genre. First, there is the ‘awakening,’ when Esperanza becomes increasingly aware that she is different and begins to question her Mexican-American heritage. This leads to Esperanza questioning her value as a human being and the social status of her race. Esperanza must learn to cope with her second-class status as a Mexican-American as well as her inferior status as a woman. Second, as she encounters an awakening of her femininity, she gains self-awareness through her relationships with a network of Mexican-American women, a key element of the female Bildungsroman, which guides and supports her in becoming self-reliant in a patriarchal society. This network provides her with moral guidance in the face of racial and gender discrimination. In turn, these building blocks help transform her into a mature, independent woman. In *The House on Mango Street* there is an ironic twist to the guidance of mentors, for often Esperanza is guided by examples of women she does not want to emulate, such as Sally and Rafaela. Third, she explores her feminine values and begins redefining her identity as she matures. Finally, as she reaches a point of maturity and independence, she concludes her journey of self-discovery. She reaches this pinnacle
with the help of the women who have guided her. By taking these specific characteristics of the female Bildungsroman and analyzing the character of Esperanza, one can see that contrary to the Bildungsroman, which is linear in nature, Cisneros created “an awakening” of the character — “the woman’s awakening is distinguished by its circularity — her need for repetition”¹¹ Indeed, Felski suggests, “the heroine must become what she once was, recover an identity, which is complete and self-contained, rather than contingent, and historically and socially determined” (141). The narrative has a plot line that would qualify as one variety of “consciousness-raising novels” which Lisa Maria Hogeland defines as narratives whose “protagonist moves from feeling somehow at odds with others’ expectations of her, into confrontations with others and with institutions, and into a new and newly politicized understanding of herself and her society.”¹²

It is through the process of making “a story for my life” (HMS, p.109), that is, the imaginative re-creation of her own experiences and interactions with her environment, that the narrating “I” begins her search for meaning and a new way of being in the world. The work centers on a Hispanic adolescent, though this time the girl is named Esperanza Cordero, a name which is not only an ethnic marker but also a gender-specific identity. Humiliated by her family’s poverty and dissatisfied
with the repressive gender values of her culture, she longs for a room of
her own and a house of which she can be proud. Esperanza uses, not New
York like Holden, but a house in Chicago, to examine her society and the
cultural oppression that weighs on her as a young Chicano teenager.
With the female "I' as the central consciousness, she has control over her
own life and her own story through the act of narrating. By this process
she actively participates in the process of her self-formation and gradually
comes to an understanding of herself and her relationship to the
community on Mango Street. This process is closely linked to her
development as an artist in the process of discovering and narrating her
experiences within the community; a development that turn the novel into
what one may call "a portrait of the artist as a young woman", that is, a
Kunstlerroman a novel that "culminates in the artist's literal or
imaginative withdrawal to the inner life which leads to a discovery of his
or her vocation" (Hirsch, 1983, p.46). It is through the process of telling
her own stories that she discovers the power of her own creativity.
Collectively these stories reveal a female Bildung process that moves
from rejection of prescribed roles to the recognition of creativity as a path
toward a self-defined identity.

Esperanza also has a series of awakenings about what it means to
be a Hispanic female in a segregated and racist patriarchal society. But
she did not make her transition into womanhood alone. Cisneros also raises the consciousness of the community of women that help guide her along on her journey by making them predominant characters within the text. By giving voices to this community of women, Cisneros breaks from the patriarchal literary structure by making the male characters weaker and by not giving them an overall influence on Esperanza’s journey into maturity.

The book's action is defined by three major themes: the girl's desire to find a suitable house (essentially a move away from the barrio), to find her identity, and to become a writer. Identity is crucial, for it not only means coming to terms with her Latino ethnicity, but also arriving at a gender consciousness not circumscribed by the gender determinants of her culture. Chicanos perceived a parallel between their people's discrimination and exploitation by the dominant white society, and their own gender discrimination and subjugation by a traditional Hispanic patriarchal culture. Consequently, Esperanza is “twice a minority;” she is doubly marginalized because of her ethnicity and her patriarchal society. As will be seen, the themes are inextricably interrelated; the resolution of the themes of house and identity is to be achieved by her role as writer. Unity is a concept that fascinates Esperanza, who views it variously as order or art. There are two kinds of unity in the collection: first, the unity
of Esperanza's life as she matures from childhood to maturity, and, second, the artistic unity of this collection of stories — which are intertwined by chronology, characters, and houses, as well as what can be termed “a lattice-work of cross-references” of images and motifs. Thus, Esperanza like Holden Caulfield uses storytelling as a moral focus for her life and her identity, and as a means of achieving the aim of her memoir: self-definition. Spiritual awareness and imaginative vision are two ways of expressing what Esperanza hopes to acquire by narrating her story, for life is “a quest for meaning and value” (Kertzer, p.34). These concepts point to Esperanza's career as a writer. She wants to perfect the power of imaginative recall until it can roam freely through the past and forge an over-arching vision, which is sympathetic, creative, and human. This is the vision of reality that Cisneros evokes in all her books and the way Esperanza defines herself: “The sum of one's life is oneself” (Kertzer, p.35). But she discovers that “she is not a single, consistent entity, but a mosaic whose picture is constantly reforming” (Kertzer, p.35). Cisneros parallels self to narrative: “The self is a history of living, or a story that we tell about ourselves” (Kertzer, p.35). The other side of this identity dilemma is the community in which the individual lives. In *The House on Mango Street*, Esperanza, struggles to find her identity through the history
of her name, the stereotypical influence from other women on Mango Street, and her literary voice.

The House on Mango Street that won Cisneros the Before Columbus American Book Award in 1985 was praised for the lyrical narrative structures, vivid dialogue, and descriptive precision. "The reality of Hispanic life rarely enters mainstream American writing," remarked Jenny Uglow, adding, "Cisneros sets out to fill the blank page and let her people speak." Thus Cisneros proves faithful to her purpose, as she defined it in a 20 May 1991 interview: "in my stories and life I am trying to show that U.S. Latinas have to reinvent, to remythologize, ourselves." Yet she remains aware of the price exacted by a revisionist approach to traditional mores, recalling in the Americas Review, 1987 "We accept our culture, but not without adapting ourselves as women." For a Hispanic the question of cultural identity often involves language. Cisneros asserted in the 4 August 1991 Chicago Tribune that "if you're bilingual, you're doubly rich. You have two ways of looking at the world."

The House on Mango Street represents a unique work of prose that defies previously existing categories of literature. Cisneros's willingness to experiment in different genres leads to stylistic and thematic crossovers. A marked departure from the traditional novel form,
Cisneros had called the stories ‘vignettes,’ that is, “literary sketches, like small illustrations nonetheless hovering in that gray area between two genres.” Julian Olivares quotes Cisneros on her intent:

I wanted to write stories that were a cross between poetry and fiction... Except I wanted to write a collection which could be read at any random point without having any knowledge of what came before or after. Or that could be read in a series to tell one big story each story contributing to the whole like beads in a necklace... I wanted stories like poems, compact and lyrical and ending with a reverberation.... (Notebook, 1987, pp.69-73)

Each vignette stands alone as a complete piece, while the forty-four vignettes together make up a composite story that traces the development of Esperanza's self-identity as a Chicano writer who resists the limitations of traditional roles imposed upon women in the Latin-American community. Cisneros reflects Esperanza’s reality: For her Mango Street, is a collection of stories and characters, and each story means something on its own but gains greater meaning when seen in light of the others. People are like this too: they are valuable as individuals, but more valuable as part of a community. The stories, like the people in her neighborhood, interact with each other, and with each interaction the stories deepen in significance. The chapters are intensely lyrical, written in a prose highly charged with metaphor. Each section has a title, and each could stand alone as an autonomous piece, like a prose poem. Esperanza's voice unifies the pieces, however, and creates a continuing
narrative. Thus is the foundation laid for the internal journey that Esperanza must traverse in order to do battle against time-honored traditions.

The novel begins with the story of the same title: *The House on Mango Street*:

We didn't always live on Mango Street. Before that we lived on Loomis on the third floor, and before that we lived on Keeler. Before Keeler it was Pauline, and before that I can't remember. But what I remember most is moving a lot...By the time we got to Mango Street we were six — Mama, Papa, Carlos, Kiki, my sister Nenny and me... (p.3)

They always told us that one day we would move into a house, a real house that would be ours for always so we wouldn't have to move each year...But the house on Mango Street is not the way they told it at all. (p.4)

The most important symbol in the novel is the titular house, which represents young girls' dreams for their own happy homes but also the prison that many homes are, guarded first by domineering fathers, and then by domineering husbands. The main conflict is the clash between Esperanza's dream— the American Dream — of owning a spacious, private, and secure house like the ones she sees on TV — and her Mango Street reality. She doesn't want to belong — not to her rundown neighborhood, known for its harsh realities, and not to the low expectations the world has for her. But she discovers that she does not belong to the race or class of people who live in such houses and that
power and peace come from recognizing one's place in and one's duty to the community.

Throughout the book there is a tension between Esperanza's ties to the barrio and her impressions of another kind of life, on the other side, in the place where people have real houses. The house becomes, essentially, the narrator's first universe. She begins here because it is the beginning of her conscious narrative reflection. She describes the house from the outside; this external depiction is a description and presentation of self: "I knew then I had to have a house. A real house. One I could point to."

(HMS, p.5) This she believes will reverse the bleak circumstances of her life, making her complete and thus valued by others. Julian Olivares states,

Mango Street is a street sign, a marker that circumscribes the neighborhood to its Latino population of Puerto Ricans, Chicanos and Mexican immigrants. This house is not the young protagonist's dream house; it is only a temporary house. The semes that we ordinarily perceive in house, and the ones Bachelard assumes — such as comfort security tranquility esteem — is lacking. This is a house that constrains, one that she wants to leave; consequently, the house sets up dialectic of inside and outside of living here and wishing to leave for there. 19

Cisneros draws on the house as a symbol for a variety of thematic concerns: the house symbolizes the American Dream of middle-class comfort that the people of Esperanza's community fantasize about but will likely never achieve, and also symbolizes the realm of literature,
expressing Esperanza's desire to become a writer. At other times, the house functions as a symbol of female confinement within the traditional, prescribed gender roles as wife and mother. Esperanza's childhood home also represents a family history and cultural heritage, which are both enriching and confining to an adolescent girl with high aspirations. Through this complex symbolism and the variety of characters and stories Esperanza reveals in her narrative, Cisneros explores themes of economic oppression, ethnic identity, female sexuality, and the power of storytelling to reconcile the past with the present and future. In the course of her development as a young writer, Esperanza struggles to negotiate conflicts between individual self-determination and community identity, between the private space of the home and the public sphere of the streets, between her Mexican heritage and her participation in American culture. Additionally, she experiences a battle between the comforts of the familiar neighborhood and the urge to break free from its limitations, as well as between traditional gender roles and her emergent feminist consciousness. Drawing heavily upon her childhood experiences and ethnic heritage as the daughter of a Mexican father and a Chicano mother, Cisneros's fiction and poetry address the impoverished conditions of barrio life, the cultural suppression of minorities in America, the struggle
for self-identity in a pluralistic society, and the influence of culturally determined gender roles on the formation of character.

For Esperanza the notion of house — a space of her own — is critical to her coming of age as a mature person and artist. Ramón Saldivar says that "this novel emphasizes the crucial roles of racial and material as well as ideological conditions of oppression." At the beginning of the novel, Esperanza explains how her parents talk about moving into a real house that would "have running water and pipes that worked" (HMS, p. 4). Instead she lives in a run-down flat and is made to feel embarrassed and humiliated because of it. Before her family moved into the house on Mango Street, Esperanza's teachers had made denigrating remarks about their living conditions. One day while she is playing outside, a nun from her school walks by and stops to talk to her.

Where do you live? She asked
There, I said pointing up to the third floor.
You live there?

There. I had to look where she pointed — the third floor, the paint peeling, wooden bars Papa had nailed on the windows so we wouldn't fall out. You live there? The way she said it made me feel like nothing (HMS, p.5).

Later in the novel, in a similar occurrence, a nun assumes that Esperanza lives in an even worse poverty-stricken area than, in fact, is the case. She wants a house she can "point to," that is, one she can point to as hers without feeling "like nothing" (5), one that does not destroy her
sense of self, clearly connecting the house with her own self-perception. By rejecting the house of her parents she rejects a structure that threatens her sense of self and takes the first step toward claiming her right to self-definition. Thus, though far from perfect, the families’ new home according to Ellen McCracken “represents a positive objectification of the self, the chance to redress humiliation and establish a dignified sense of her own personhood.” Esperanza forges her identity through the metaphor of the house: “both a symbol of the socio-economic condition in which Esperanza finds herself and a symbol of human consciousness.” Her longing for her own house underscores her need for something uplifting and stable with which she can identify and therefore suggests “a positive objectification of the self.” By pointing to this dilapidated house, she points to herself. Olivares says “thus the house and narrator become identified as one, thereby revealing an ideological perspective of poverty and shame” (1988, pp.162–63). Cisneros also successfully dramatizes both the individual and the communal significance of owning a house. Such a basic human desire and need is especially crucial for economically oppressed minorities. The house Esperanza dreams of beyond her family home will still have a communal function. She vows that

One day I’ll own my own house, but I won’t forget who I am or where I came from. Passing bums will ask, Can I come
in? I’ll offer them the attic, ask them to stay, because I know how it is to be without a house. (HMS, p.87)

The penultimate vignette, *A House of My Own*, echoes the essay *A Room of One's Own*, by early-twentieth-century feminist writer Virginia Woolf. In Cisneros's rendition of Woolf's assertion that a woman needs a room of her own in order to become a writer and Esperanza’s journey towards independence merges the central themes of writing and a house of her own. In a distinctive motif Cisneros also establishes a link between the image of the house and creativity, not only in the bedtime stories Esperanza’s mother tells, but also in the daughter’s wish: “a house all my own … a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (HMS, p.108). Minerva, barely two years older than Esperanza, writes poetry when not dealing with her two children and an abusive husband. In fact, Esperanza realizes that Minerva’s writing allows her to transcend her predicament. The house Esperanza longs for, certainly, is a house where she can have her own room and one she can point to in pride, but, it is as Olivares mentions, “fundamentally a metaphor for the house of storytelling”: “...what I remember most is Mango Street” (HMS, p.110) because of it she became a writer. Esperanza will leave Mango Street but take it with her always, for it “is inscribed within her” (Olivares, 1988, p.167-69) and “*las comadres*”
(godmothers or women close to the family circle) tell Esperanza that her art must be linked to the community:

When you leave you must remember always to come back for the others. A circle, you understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street... You can't forget who you are. (HMS, p.105)

Writing then empowers Esperanza and strengthens her commitment to the community of Chicanos. Indications of Esperanza's formation as a writer and predictions of her eventual move from home and Mango Street are given in two stories related to death, suggesting perhaps that creativity is not only a means of escape from the confines of Mango Street but also an affirmation of life and a rebirth. In the dialogue Esperanza relates with her aunt in Bad Girl, the twenty-third piece, she reveals that she writes poetry, and with the subsequent stories it becomes clear that these are the memoirs she has written of her first year's experience of living in the barrio, in the little red house on Mango Street:

You live right here, 4006 Mango, Alicia says and points to the house I am ashamed of.
No, this isn't my house I say and shake my head as if shaking could undo the year I've lived here (HMS, p.106)

Esperanza's poem reflects her desire to be someone else, her dissatisfaction with herself:

I want to be
Like the waves on the sea,
Like the clouds in the wind,
But I'm me (HMS, p.60)
She desires to be like "the waves on the sea/like the clouds in the wind" two natural forces that are constantly redefining themselves, always shifting their shape and altering their movements. Esperanza doesn't want to be held to one way of being. It is through writing, as her aunt tells her, that she will achieve her social and gender liberation:

That's nice. That's very good, she said in her tired voice. You just remember to keep writing, Esperanza. You must keep writing. It will keep you free, and I said yes, but at that time I didn't know what she meant. (HMS, p.61)

Though Esperanza confesses she didn't know what Aunt Lupe meant at that time, this book is evidence that she eventually understood, she has been freed, and that she has finally found a real house — "a new house, a house made of heart" (HMS, p.64) where she and all the people from Mango Street reside. A real house is not something material, but rather something spiritual: It is only within her heart — within herself — that Esperanza will find her true home. When one's home is in the heart, one can be at home anywhere. Esperanza elects to build a real house, but distinct from Augie and Holden, this is just what she has accomplished — a house within her heart, where she and all the people from Mango Street still live. Though these books represent different times in American history, the narrative pattern, style and language are strikingly similar and this leads to — "a literary continuity." So that what Cisneros picks up, is
an archetypal continuity, which is cultural as well as literary. Aunt Lupe knew the power that words, shaped into stories and poems, have to keep one free from what hurts and haunts. The vignette concludes with a cryptic: “And then we began to dream the dreams” (HMS, p.61).

Esperanza finds her literary voice through her own cultural experience. “She seeks self-empowerment through writing, while recognizing her commitment to a community essential in connecting herself with the power of women.”24 Her literary voice allows Esperanza to find her own identity and use her experience on Mango Street as a building experience. She states, “I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much... [Mango] does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free” (HMS, p.110). For Esperanza, writing ultimately helps her to fully comprehend herself and the members of the Mango Street community. Esperanza’s desire for a real house can thus be seen as a desire for an understanding and acceptance of the self. For Esperanza, a house represents status, security, and a rise above poverty. A real house would give her privacy, and it would give her a space of her own where she could forge her identity. In this sense the house becomes a metaphor of the space for writing. Esperanza Cordero is clearly conscious of self-exploration through writing. The need for a house and to be a writer is actually inseparable. The house she imagines and
describes becomes her symbol for freedom and artistic expression. It also ties her to her community and is the source of her identity and her stories. How artistic creation strengthens identity and provides dignity is an important theme of the novel. Esperanza knows she requires a space for autonomy in order to create her fiction and her self apart from the traditional role of women in her culture. In the final vignette, *Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes*, Esperanza tells her readers “I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong” (HMS, p.109). The conclusion of the novel then ends with the same words that make up the opening of the book — in a paragraph that begins, “We didn't always live on Mango Street” (p.109). Cisneros brings the story full circle, ending the work with the culmination of Esperanza's coming-of-age — the writing of the book itself. Unlike the boys' quests, however, this novel is put together in one way to show Esperanza's growth, but in another to imitate the part-by-part building of an edifice. Indeed, the house on Mango Street does not just refer to the place Esperanza is trying to leave, but to the novel itself as a house which Esperanza as character and Cisneros as author have built together. From the first moment Esperanza realizes that the color of her skin makes her different, and the self-satisfaction she feels writing down her
feelings, the reader is led through her journey of growth and transformation.

Consequently, she wants to point to another house and to another self. And as she longs for this other house and self, she also longs for another name. But she will find that in growing up and writing, she will come to inhabit a special house to fit into, and find comfort in her name. Ultimately, Esperanza's ability to see beyond her immediate surroundings allows her to transcend her circumstances and immaturity. The conclusion is that, in essence, Esperanza takes within her the memories from the house as she also carries her mementos from Mango Street, her "bags of books and paper" (HMS, p.110). These are "her roots, her inspirations, and the kernels" of what Cisneros sensed, years ago in a seminar at the Iowa Writers Program where she participated in a discussion of Gaston Bachelard's The Poetics of Space and realized that her unique experience of the intersection of race, ethnicity, class, and gender separated her from other American writers.

Though Esperanza is painfully aware of the racial and economic oppression her community suffers, it is the fate of the women in her barrio that has the most profound impact on her. As she begins to develop sexually she apprehends that the fate of these women might be hers too. She ponders on the consequences of choosing marriage over education,
the possible loss of the emotional liberation attained through writing words. All this adds to the sense of confusion associated with adolescence. So in a general way Cisneros's novel belongs to a feminine tradition in which culture and literature are important. But for her, far more significant as literary models are Huck Finn and Holden Caulfield, primarily because they are adolescents growing up in culturally oppressive worlds. Cisneros's protagonist, like them, is innocent, sensitive, and considerate of others, but extremely vulnerable. Like them, Esperanza speaks a child's language, and develops mentally as time goes on. She knows how she feels, and learns from the inside out what in Holden's term is "phony."

Esperanza recognizes immediately, in Boys and Girls, that boys and girls live in separate universes where communication, particularly name-calling and humiliation, maintains that separateness. From experience, however, she begins to recognize how gender distinctions continue into adulthood, for young girls, in a guise that appears to be both the object of their dreams — marriage and family — and the source of their pain and subjugation. The house indicates a gender trap fortified by the cycle of poverty from which women and children suffer because of their economic dependence on men. And while there are young women who cast off the passive role allocated to them, they must endure
resulting difficulties. Cisneros examines the shifting boundaries of gender and genre and reassigns new roles to women as instigators in social and political change. Thus, women's history is not perceived as a separate discipline; instead, the stories of both genders are interwoven. For example, Esperanza yearns for a private space, yet she weaves her tale of growing up with snapshots of women entrapped in houses, exploring in this way the indeterminate area between privacy and entrapment. Similarly, her attitude towards the public site of the barrio is ambivalent. Both houses and local communities are fixed; like borders, they enclose people within the safety of familiar or intimate territories, but can, at the same time, become prisons.

Though full of characters that lack power — socially, politically, economically, and sexually — the novel is not a story of despair, but of hope, which is what the narrator’s name, Esperanza, means in English. But the identity she seeks must be freed from the gender oppression of her culture. In the vignette *My Name* the fourth piece, Julian Olivares points out, “Esperanza traces the reason for the discomfiture with her name to cultural oppression the Mexican males’ suppression of their women” (p.163). Esperanza’s name represents her most basic struggle with her Spanish-American identity. She says: “In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness; it
means waiting” (HMS, p.10) — a reference to the sadness and waiting of her great-grandmother after whom she was named. She was “a wild horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier” and tamed her, so that: “She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow ...” (HMS, p.11)

Here we have not the space of contentment but of sadness, and “dialectic of inside and outside. Of living here and wishing to leave for there” (Olivares, 1988, emphasis added) The novel captures the dialectic between self and community in Chicano writing. The woman's place is one of domestic confinement, not one of liberation and choice. Esperanza also reveals that she is named after her great-grandmother, who like Esperanza was born in the “Chinese year of the horse — which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female.” She exposes this as a lie since “the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong” (HMS, p.10). The multiplicity of meanings that intersect in her name is further underscored by the female legacy the name Esperanza carries in the family. Named after her Mexican great-grandmother, Esperanza is linked through her name to her cultural past and to her identity as a woman within a particular socio-cultural context. The inheritance
symbolizes the strong family bond of Latinos in their effort to keep the family names alive. This story of her namesake, of a strong and rebellious woman who nevertheless had to succumb to patriarchal coercion and control, makes her conscious of the position women in general hold within her own cultural framework. Esperanza links her great-grandmother's fate, her confinement, her sadness and lost hope, with her own name, that is, her self, making her name synonymous to her culture's definitions of gender roles, definitions she can only reject: "I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window" (HMS, p.11). She thus makes a clear distinction between the wild great-grandmother she would have liked to have known, and the socio-cultural system that subdued her. By accepting her name, but refusing to accept a heritage of female confinement, Esperanza carries on a legacy of rebellion against patriarchal definitions of female selfhood. Esperanza is already aware of the patriarchal society that wishes to rob her of her strong will and independence. She feels restricted by her name, as if someone else has predetermined her identity. Her attempt to decode the meaning of her name becomes an attempt to come to terms with her bicultural identity. The very pronunciation of her name changes with language and cultural context. Her name is thus a sign of a complex bicultural context that requires her to negotiate among opposing cultural
meanings to come to terms with her own self. As the female heroines of the *Bildungsroman* move with faltering steps toward their identity, their progress is deterred by patriarchal "naming," which includes even the personal names they receive at birth and at marriage. "Women have called the process of giving form to their experience through words a new naming." Thus, Esperanza would like “to baptize [herself] under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do” (HMS, p.11) Her choice of name, Zeze the X, indicates that what she wants is a name that carries no contradicting cultural connotations; it is, culturally speaking, a "hollow" name she would have to invest with meaning and identity, and unlike her name "Esperanza," it is not "culturally embedded in a dominating, male-centered ideology" (Olivares, 1988, p.163). However, it is not so much the name that Esperanza wants to change, but the history and expectations that come with it. She wants to reinvent herself, and she can do so, she thinks, by giving herself a new name. This preference ultimately forces Esperanza to leave Mango Street, in search of a more promising future. To Esperanza her name embodies contradictory meaning — hope for womanhood that represents empowerment as opposed to oppressiveness, sadness and waiting. Ultimately that hope for empowerment extends not solely to womanhood
but to humanity in general. Furthermore, Esperanza’s surname ‘Cordero’ meaning, ‘lamb,’ operates symbolically in the text, but in an ironic manner. She refuses to sacrifice her gender to a patriarchic society. “This desire is indicative of her refusal to be externally defined either by her house, by her socio-economic circumstances, or by her name, that is, by traditional patriarchal values, in her quest for a self-defined identity” (Eysturoy, 1996, p. 98).

In subsequent works — including the collection of stories Woman Hollering Creek (1991) and the volumes of poetry My Wicked, Wicked Ways (1987) and Loose Woman (1994) — Cisneros continued to explore common themes that focus on Hispanic women, divided cultural loyalties, feelings of alienation, sexual and cultural oppression, degradation associated with poverty, family violence, artistic creativity, and personal identity. In her prefatory poem to My Wicked, Wicked Ways, Cisneros asks, “what does a woman (like me) inherit that tells her how to go”? This question about the cultural inheritance of Mexican American women and how it shapes their perceptions of the choices available to them is central to Cisneros’ work. Throughout her poetry and fiction, she has depicted the material and ideological forces that circumscribe Mexican American women’s lives. Like Cisneros herself, her female characters often must come to terms with a cultural tradition that they
love but also view as oppressive because of the limited conception of appropriate behavior for women available within Mexican narratives and culture.

The House on Mango Street is dedicated a las Mujeres ‘to the women.’ and Cisneros offers the reader great insights into the lives of her female characters. One of the most enduring themes of the book is the ‘socialization’ of females within Chicano society based on the fixed roles of the family. Cisneros explores the dynamics of women's lives within this precarious and male dominated society, where the conditions of females are predetermined by economic and social constraints. For most women in the neighborhood, these constraints are too powerful to overcome. However, Esperanza possesses the power to see beyond her circumstances and the world of the ghetto, while those around her fall prey to it and perpetuate its cycle. Esperanza's mother is typical of the Hispanic woman grounded in this way of life. The image of Ruthie is of a female literally trapped and unable to escape Mango Street, escape her mother’s living room, for that matter she is only one of the many symbols in the book of the trapped female. Her mother is typical of the women in Latin American communities whose life is defined by marriage, family, children, and traditionally female activities. Esperanza’s mother, who is a first generation Mexican-American, wishes for her daughters a better life
outside the cycle of subjugation that characterizes her own, and she views education as the ticket out of that way of life. She wants Esperanza to have what she did not — an education and a career, something more to live for than just a man — “Got to take care all your own,” (HMS, p.91) her mother says (got to be independent). Mama proclaims to Esperanza, “I could've been somebody, you know?” (p.90) — explaining that she left school although she was “a smart cookie then” (HMS, p.91) because she was ashamed that she did not have nice clothes. What made her mother quit school was shame. This brings to mind the vignette Chanclas, which translates as old shoes, also has the Spanish-American meaning of good-for-nothing which is exactly how Esperanza felt at the baptism party in her new dress and old shoes. She almost quit because she was ashamed of her shoes. This chapter is important because Esperanza learns to overcome that shame. Once she forgets about her shoes and begins to dance, she herself begins to feel attractive. The shoes become incidental, not elemental, to her beauty. She must learn to avoid shame, to be happy because “Shame is a bad thing...It keeps you down” (p.91). The work captures the universal pangs of otherness — what Cisneros, in her introduction to the tenth anniversary edition, has called “the shame of being poor, of being female, of being not-quite-good-enough.” It suggests
from where that otherness comes and shows how it can become a cause for celebration rather than shame.

Esperanza’s mother wants her to be a survivalist in a segregated community. Laying down the moral roots of her being, her mother teaches Esperanza to be self-reliant in the face of adversity, a type of instruction that is a component of the female Bildungsroman. Serving as an anchor in Esperanza’s life, she provides guidance and love — lessons in living. Her mothers’ lessons were vital to Esperanza; this is the measure of what a human being can be in Esperanza’s child-eye view, and this type of woman is what she wanted to become.

Cisneros uses a combination of poetry and storytelling to portray Esperanza’s world. Her figurative and imagistic language, is seen especially in the vignette Hairs, Esperanza’s mother’s hair, which she likes best, is “like little rosettes, like little candy circles” (p.6) and it “is the warm smell of bread before you bake it” (p.6) It is significant that her mother’s hair is her favorite and makes her feel safe, for it is from her mother that Esperanza will learn her “place” — her role as a young Chicano girl and woman. However, her hair “never obeys barrettes or bands” (HMS, p.6) and this suggests that Esperanza may not obey all her mother’s traditions. Her mother strongly believes that the education of females help bring about social changes and moves women into a
different sphere where they are no longer subjected to domestic positions, a goal that Esperanza wanted to achieve.

In *Those Who Don't*, Esperanza addresses two of the largest themes of the novel: stereotyping of Mexican Americans resulting in prejudice. Esperanza notices that people “who don’t know any better” (HMS, p.28) — non-Hispanics — are afraid in Esperanza’s neighborhood. They assume that because Hispanics are “different,” they are “dangerous” and ready to “attack (strangers) with shiny knives” (HMS, p.28) — who enter their neighborhood. But Esperanza knows better. Her familiarity with the people in the neighborhood — and the color of the people in her neighborhood — takes away Esperanza’s fear. Were those who don’t know better to spend some time in her neighborhood, they would no longer be afraid. Unfortunately, color seems to be what draws the boundaries in the neighborhoods around Mango Street. When Esperanza leaves the familiar sight of brown faces and enters “into a neighborhood of another color,” she, too, is frightened. She acknowledges the sad fact that this is, unfortunately, a part of human nature, something that has happened before, is happening now, and will continue to happen — “that is how it goes and goes.” Perceptions are hard to change and prejudice dies hard. In this passage, it is apparent that Esperanza is beginning her journey of transformation by questioning her Mexican-American
heritage. She internalizes this difference and considers — “all brown all around, we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight” (HMS, p.28).

Esperanza must start to evolve from what she has learned and begin to put to use that knowledge to build her own worth. As Cisneros works with Esperanza to stimulate her self-worth, the reader can now begin to follow her growth as she moves forward with her internal awakening and watch her as she learns to be an intellectual individual. Following her awakening, Esperanza begins the struggle of overcoming the pain of realizing that her physical appearance places her outside the social ideal. This awakening leads to the introduction of the second characteristic of a female Bildungsroman — guidance from a network of strong Mexican women. By prominently displaying the female characters in the text and having the male characters less intrusive in the development of Esperanza, Cisneros breaks from the patriarchal literary structure to create a network of women that replace the traditional male roles. This contributes to the journey toward self-awakening as Felski argues, “encounters with other women also form a central part of the discovery process...the group of women providing the organic and
harmonious community, which opposes the rationalized world of male society” (135).

Esperanza learns from a network of women who teach her traditional moral values, independence, education, and self-reliance. Of these female characters, her mother is the one who has the strongest influence on Esperanza as has already been discussed. The next character in this network of women to help Esperanza with empowerment is Alicia. Like Esperanza, Alicia desires something more than the traditional role for the Chicano woman. In Alicia Who Sees Mice, a vignette both lyrical and hauntingly realistic, the narrator describes her friend's life. Because her mother has died, Alicia, the oldest, has “inherited her mama’s rolling pin and sleepiness,” and she must study late into the night, beginning only after her “woman’s work” is done. Alicia

...studies for the first time at the university. Two trains and a bus, because she doesn't want to spend her whole life in a factory or behind a rolling pin... studies all night and sees the mice, the ones her father says do not exist. Is afraid of nothing except four-legged fur. And fathers (HMS, pp.31-32)

Alicia must arise early to make her father's lunchbox tortillas:

Close your eyes and they'll go away, her father says, or You're just imagining. And anyway, a woman's place is sleeping so she can wake up early with the tortilla star, the one that appears early just in time to rise and catch the hind legs hide behind the sink, beneath the four-clawed tub, under
Here we note “a space of misery and subjugation, a Latino’s perception of life all magnificently crystallized in the image of the tortilla star” (Olivares, 1988). To Alicia Venus, the morning star does not mean wishing upon or waiting for a star to fall down as it does for Rafaela. For Alicia, it means having to get up early, a rolling pin and tortillas. Here we do not see the tortilla as a symbol of cultural identity but as a symbol of a subjugating ideology, of sexual domination, of the imposition of a role that the young woman must assume. Alicia’s father denies the reality of the poverty and her intelligence and desire for independence by telling her she’s imagining “the mice, which scurry under the swollen floorboards nobody fixes” (HMS, p.31). Despite this pressure from her father — or perhaps because of it — Alicia perseveres. Alicia’s father represents the patriarchal system that could, in a moment, take away her opportunity to control and improve her life. At the end of the story, the narrator lauds Alicia for being a good girl, for studying, and for seeing the mice her powerful father insists do not exist. The mice symbolize Alicia’s persistence as she attempts to escape her father’s domination and control. At the same time, she must also deal with her real potential for failure as a young woman entirely responsible for full-time work in and
out of the home, in addition to her responsibilities to herself at the university.

In *Rafaela Who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays*, the girls are saddened by the fate of a young bride who arrives at womanhood only to be physically locked inside, isolated from family and friends, by a possessive husband:

On Tuesdays Rafaela's husband comes home late because that's the night he plays dominoes. And then Rafaela, who is still young but getting old from leaning out the window so much, gets locked indoors because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at. (HMS, p.79)

Rafaela “who drinks and drinks coconut and papaya juice on Tuesdays and wishes there were sweeter drinks, not bitter like an empty room,” (p.80) wishes for romance and the freedom of the outside world. Here Venus and the implication of sex and marriage as escape is demystified, is eclipsed by a cultural reality that points to the drudgery of the inside.

There are two types of girls in Mango Street. There are those few who strive for an education, like Alicia and Esperanza, but most want to grow up fast, get married and get out. But those, like Minerva and Sally, usually have to get married, and they leave a father for a domineering husband. Sally, an older girl on Mango Street, introduces Esperanza to sexuality and the supposed glamorous myth associated with femininity.
In Sally, Esperanza develops an image of painted eyes and forbidden beauty. However, in Linoleum Roses: Esperanza sees Sally, who falls into the same trap as most of the other women on Mango Street, as someone who “got married...young and not ready but married” as Esperanza says, “to escape” — to escape her father, his beatings, “that’s why her skin is always scarred” (92) his prison of a home, and his shame “he thinks I’m going to run away like his sisters who made the family ashamed. Just because I’m a daughter;” to escape the eyes of all those “waiting for her to get into trouble” (HMS, p. 101) Sally is transferred from one kind of confinement to another where:

[Her husband] won't let her talk on the telephone. And he doesn't let her look out the window. And he doesn't like her friends, so nobody gets to visit her unless he is working.

She sits at home because she is afraid to go outside without his permission. She looks at all the things they own: the towels and the toaster, the alarm clock and the drapes. She likes looking at the walls, at how neatly their corners meet, the linoleum roses on the floor, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake. (HMS, pp.101-102)

Esperanza does not want to become trapped in the same situation in which Sally finds herself and views Sally's situation as a cautionary lesson. “Linoleum Roses is a trope for household confinement and drudgery,” (Olivares, 1988) in which beauty; femininity, garden (the outside) and rose as a metaphor for woman is ironically treated. The roses decorate the linoleum floor that Sally will have to scrub. This is an
image of her future. The image of the final line, the ceiling smooth as wedding cake, resonates through the story in an ironical twist, a picture of despair. Such images as tortilla star and linoleum roses are the type of imagery that perhaps only a woman could create, because they are derived from a woman's perception of reality; that is to say, that this imagery is not biologically determined but that it is culturally inscribed.

One threat to young girls that Cisneros explores is the reality of sexual violence against women. Two stories specifically address this subject in vivid though not graphic terms: *Minerva Writes Poems* and *Marin*, from the story of the same name, who is too beautiful for her own good. She is trapped inside all day and at night is allowed to go as far as the front yard. Her boundaries are clear, yet within her boundaries she rebels. She smokes, wears make-up and short skirts, flirts and dances alone under the streetlight. She plans to marry a nice man she’ll meet on the subway to Puerto Rico, someone who’ll take her “to live in a big house far away” (HMS, p.26) from Mango Street. What Marin doesn’t realize is that marriage brings with it its own boundaries, both figurative and literal. Still Marin waits, says Esperanza, “for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life” (p.27). Marin is waiting for someone else to take her away, for someone else to change her life, instead of making the change on her own.
In Minerva Writes Poems, a young girl, a little bit older than Esperanza refuses to leave her husband, even though he beats her, because he is the father of her two children. The vignette is filled with images of circles. Minerva who’s “luck is unlucky” (p.84) is caught in a cycle. Her husband beats her, and she kicks him out. When he apologizes, she lets him return — and he beats her again. He is the husband “who left and keeps leaving” (p.85). Minerva asks Esperanza an important question: What can she do? Esperanza’s answer is “There is nothing I can do” (HMS, p.85 emphasis added). She understands that only Minerva has the power to help herself. She is in the cycle; she must break it. There is, however, something Esperanza can do, and is doing: sharing poems with Minerva. If Minerva keeps writing, there is hope that she will break the cycle. In fact Esperanza realizes that Minerva’s writing allows her to transcend her predicament. Cisneros’ short story, Woman Hollering Creek as companion to the novel, presents possibilities for a young married woman resisting a husband who treats her badly.

Esperanza sees, as Olivares notes, “the woman's place is one of domestic confinement, not one of liberation and choice” (163). And so, slowly, cumulatively, story-by-story, Esperanza comes to realize that she must leave Mango Street so that she will not be entrapped by poverty and shame or imprisoned by patriarchy. Other women may have a powerful
influence over Esperanza, but only she can decide which path to take in life. This journey towards empowerment lies within the individual woman. Esperanza continues on her journey towards womanhood, but now the challenge is much higher. She needs to summon all of her inner strength and understand her femininity to become an adult. As Esperanza continues to mature, she learns who she is as a woman and tries to establish her own unique female identity.

Adolescent myths and superstitions about sexuality surround Esperanza. She believes that beauty is a form of power: it allows women like Nenny, who has “pretty eyes,” “to pick and choose” (HMS, p.88). Esperanza isn’t beautiful — “I am an ugly daughter. I am the one nobody comes for” (HMS, p.88) — but she wants to be like the women in the movies: “the beautiful and cruel women” who are independent and powerful because their beauty gives them control over men. In Hips, for example, Esperanza and her friends imagine the day they will have hips and learn to move them to attract men, to dance, and to rock children to sleep. “The bones just one day open... One day you might decide to have kids, and then where are you going to put them?” (p.50)

Her biological transformation marks a crucial point in Esperanza’s self-development, as it is then that she begins to note not only her own sexual difference but also its implications for her as a woman. She looks
enviously at Sally as an image of maturity — how to put on make-up, how
to dress — “My mother says to wear black so young is dangerous, but I
want to buy shoes just like yours” (HMS, p.82). Sally becomes
Esperanza’s guide to what to her are the secrets of womanhood, with the
implication that Sally also becomes the transmitter of cultural values in
respect to how girls are supposed to relate to boys. She boldly
experiments with the trappings of womanhood by wearing high heels in
*The Family of Little Feet*. The symbolic importance of the clothes to the
girls is shown one day when the girls are given a bag of high-heeled
shoes that Esperanza calls “magic high heels” (HMS, p.40). When
Esperanza, Nenny, Lucy, and Rachel put on the shoes they felt like
“Cinderella.” They spend time learning how to cross and uncross their
legs and how to walk down to the corner “so that the shoes talk back to
you with every step” (p.40). Esperanza says “the men can't take their eyes
off us” (HMS, p.40) and the girls don't seem to mind this treatment either.
They enjoy it, because they are too young to understand that they are
denigrated as objects, not people. They strut around the neighborhood
acting like the older girls until a homeless man accosts them. After
fleeing, the girls, quickly take off the shoes with the intention of never
wearing them again, discovering that acting sexy is more dangerous than
liberating. Erlinda Gonzales-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo argue,
“Esperanza seems to understand the limitations of living just for male attention and the loneliness and passivity in feminine self objectivity” (1985, p.84).

*The Monkey Garden* used to be a sanctuary for Esperanza, but in this vignette, it becomes a symbol of her childhood and innocence, something she must leave behind. Esperanza wants to run with the others, although she is “getting too old to play the games” (HMS, p.96). Sally has “her own game now,” (96) a game Esperanza doesn’t understand, as she has already crossed a line Esperanza does not want to cross. She is angry when Sally decides to play Tito’s game, where she must offer her body to get her keys back. It indicates Sally’s readiness to move on and become a woman, something Esperanza is not ready to do. Esperanza’s attempt to save Sally makes her look ridiculous to Sally and the boys, and she feels ashamed. She hides in the garden and cries. When she gets up, to her feet, they don’t “seem to be [hers] anymore. And the garden that had been such a good place to play didn’t seem [hers] either” (HMS, p.98).

Esperanza is not ready to be initiated into ‘womanhood,’ but in *Red Clowns*, she is literally forced into it. Esperanza’s brushes with sexuality are dangerous and negative in this vignette, and she feels betrayed by the way her friends, the movies, and magazines portray love. The initial
presentiment, however, that something is wrong in the way the adolescent boys interact with Sally is confirmed when Esperanza, left alone by Sally and her boyfriend in an amusement park, is confronted with male power and is attacked and raped by a group of boys near a carnival. To Esperanza the reality of this brutal sexual initiation stands in sharp contrast to what she had been told about sexual relationships:

Sally, you lied. It wasn’t what you said at all. What he did. Where he touched me. I didn’t want it, Sally. The way they said it, the way it’s supposed to be, all the storybooks and movies, why did you lie to me? (HMS, p.99)

This vignette is an indictment of a society that glorifies sex, leaving the young ones like Sally unaware of the dark, aggressive side of male sexuality. The “diatribe” is directed not only at Sally but also at the community of women who keep the truth from the younger generation of women in a “conspiracy of silence.” The protagonist discovers a conspiracy of “two forms of silence: silence in not denouncing the real facts of life about sex and its negative aspects in violent sexual encounters, and complicity in embroidering a fairy-tale-like mist around sex, and romanticizing and idealizing unrealistic sexual relations....”29 As if the violence alone were not difficult enough, we learn that one of the boys had whispered about his victim “I love you, Spanish girl” (HMS, p.100), but what he does to her shows not love but self-love and violence conveying racist as well as sexist domination. No one has warned
Esperanza of the brutal power of male sexuality, to control and destroy her own sexual development. Esperanza not only loses her virginity, she also loses part of her identity and independence. This is the lie they have told her. After the rape by the neighborhood boy, she feels ashamed. Once again, she questions her femininity and her sexual orientation. She is confused by her feelings because she expects something more, something that makes her feel like a woman. The sexual encounter is to be on her terms and under her control. This last question is central to Esperanza’s sexual initiation, as it shows that she feels violated, not only physically by the boys, but also psychologically by a framework of omnipresent cultural myths that shroud the reality of patriarchal violence in idealistic romance. The theme of the silent, voiceless victim, the woman that is afraid to denounce her attackers, is reiterated:

Sally, make him stop. I couldn’t make them go away. I couldn’t do anything but cry. I don’t remember. It was dark. I don’t remember. I don’t remember. Please don’t make me tell it all. (HMS, p.100)

Esperanza’s sexual initiation is thus an initiation into knowledge about herself as a sexual subject who has been manipulated by a framework of cultural myths. By telling her own version of her sexual initiation, however, Esperanza creates a text that stands in direct opposition to the cultural texts, the storybooks, magazines, and movies
"that told it wrong," thus refusing to participate in the conspiracy of silence which force women into sharing in their own oppression.

After observing characters such as Sally, Minerva, and Rafaela, who, through early and abusive marriages are trapped in the neighborhood and into identifying themselves through their male connections, Esperanza decides to rebel — to wage “a quiet war” (HMS, p.89) — against the patriarchal society that expects her to suppress her individuality and “grow up tame” (HMS, p.88). She says, “I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate” (HMS, p.89). She will not fill the traditional female role. Instead, she will behave like a man, leaving her dishes at the table instead of clearing them away.

Esperanza, in Beautiful and Cruel, says, “I have decided not to grow up tame like the others who lay their necks on the threshold waiting for the ball and chain” (HMS, p.88). This is a powerful image given the marriages Esperanza sees around her, she views waiting for marriage like waiting for the guillotine, and marriage as a form of slavery. As critics Gonzales-Berry and Tey Diana Rebolledo have aptly pointed out, “young Esperanza is a courageous character that must combat the socialization process imposed on females; the character breaks from the tradition of the usual protagonist of the female Bildungsroman by consistently rejecting
the models presented to her and seeking another way to be Chicana”

Despite the cumulative threat the house and Mango Street present
to her sense of self, she begins to imagine herself beyond Mango Street,
determined to “make the best of it” (HMS, p.33). Estranged by the social
implications of living in this environment, Esperanza disavows her
relationship to Mango Street — “I don’t ever want to come from here”
(HMS, p.106) — identifying herself with the only piece of nature present
in the barrio, four trees “who do not belong here but are here.” The
quotation from *Four Skinny Trees* illustrates optimism despite the
limitations. “Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not
forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be.” (HMS, p.75) The
four trees, like her have “skinny necks and pointy elbows” (HMS,
p.74). Others, like Nenny, do not appreciate those trees, but for
Esperanza, “they teach” (HMS, p.75), helping her to realize that like them
she is here and yet does not belong. Esperanza, like the trees, is trapped.
While Esperanza is trapped on Mango Street, the trees are trapped in
concrete. And like the trees Esperanza, who thinks in images, must
continue to reach. This identification with a small part of nature in this
urban environment exemplifies the primacy of nature in female
development. In her longing to escape her present circumstances,
Esperanza sees the trees as role models for her own liberation: “their strength is secret” (p. 74) and they “grow despite concrete,” (p. 75) thus symbolizing Esperanza’s own struggle to grow in a hostile environment, her desire to reach beyond the concrete, beyond class and race boundaries, for self-definition. The desire to leave Mango Street is the desire to lay new roots. Her goal, like the trees, is not to forget her reason for being and “send ferocious roots beneath the ground...never quit their anger. This is how they keep” (HMS, p. 74).

In her attempt to deconstruct socio-cultural lies by telling the truth, Esperanza turns her narrative attention to the women on Mango Street. Realizing that their fate can be hers, she begins to examine their lives in order to come to an understanding of her own relationship to the socio-cultural world of the barrio. Perceived from Esperanza’s female perspective, this environment takes on distinct characteristics, in that she, in her evolving consciousness about herself as a woman, becomes increasingly aware of the contradictions between her emerging female self and the circumstances that inform women’s lives on Mango Street. Indeed, Esperanza is very different from the other women in the text. She has a reason to be concerned about her future role as a woman; she does not want to be stuck with the same options as Sally or her grandmother in the segregated South where tradition dictates who she is to become.
Esperanza wants to break from this mould. She does not want to be caught up in the generational stigma of being the domesticated woman. Her independence as a Mexican-American woman must break new ground. This is part of her self-identity. She has learned from them and not made their mistakes. So she is not trapped like her mother, Alicia, or Sally, or the others. Esperanza comes to realize, in examining the lives of the women on Mango Street, that a woman’s house is often a confining patriarchal domain rather than the house of liberation she imagines for herself. Her initial wish for an illusive real house, one she can proudly point to, is thus in the course of her narrative transformed into a more defined desire for a place that transcends the mere physical living quarters. She wants not only a house but also a life that is unconfined by a father or a husband or prescriptive social expectations, a non-patriarchal space in which she can create for herself her own destiny. Gradually, Esperanza comes to see that the pressure on women in Chicano families comes from a system she simply, though painfully, has to leave. This act reflects the life of Cisneros herself, who says she had to leave home in order to write about “those ghosts inside that haunt me” (Notebook, 1987, pp.72-73)

Before Esperanza only wanted a house, but now her dreams have added a new dimension. She is sounding more confident about her
success and she has added an altruistic or selfless side to her dream. She breaks a cycle she has been caught up in. Until now she has been trying to forget who she is and where she came from. Now, she says when she gets her own house, she won’t forget and will let ‘bums’ sleep in the ‘attic’ of her house “one day because [she] know[s] how it is to be without a house” (HMS, p.87). In Bums in the Attic, the economic disparity between people who live on hills and those who live in the barrio is clear. She has realized that “people who live on hills...forget those of us who live too much on earth” (HMS, p.86). She is the example for other Chicano women whom Cisneros would have us take to heart. Indeed, as the witch woman Elenita predicted earlier, Esperanza elects to build “a new house, a house made of heart” (HMS, p.64), a home for herself where she will have freedom for her inner life and space for her writing.

Finally, in The Three Sisters, “One of the Comadres asks Esperanza, “What’s your name... Esperanza, I said” (HMS, p.104). Esperanza for the first time makes no apologies for her name, nor does she express desire for another. She identifies her name as “Esperanza.” At this point she has begun to recognize the complexity of herself and the possible connotations in her name. She uses the name given to her so she can maintain her ties with her matrilineal past worlds and include present world meaning which were previously excluded: a radical, non-
individualistic gesture. By recognizing her social location and controlling how she constructs herself, Esperanza can then construct her house “clean as paper before the poem” (HMS, p.108) loose from static and oppressive cultural ties. Several worlds influence Esperanza, but she never ceases to be the young-Chicano-in-Chicago world and her self-affirmation creates her confidence to declare Esperanza as the new radical name. Her identity, after the process of the text, accurately recognizes her social location and allows her to develop her personal interests.

The realization of the possibility of escape through the space of writing, as well as the determination to move away from Mango Street, are expressed in Mango Says Goodbye Sometimes: “I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong” (HMS, p.109). The ending of Mango Street is very significant in terms of literary continuity. Just prior to the end, at the funeral for Rachel and Lucy’s baby sister, she meets their three old aunts who read her palm and her mind: “When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand?” (HMS, p.105) They tell her she cannot forget who she is and that if she leaves she must come back. The circle is an important symbol in the novel as a whole. A circle is endless — it has no beginning and no end; it is complete; it is entirely equal and whole.
There is no beginning and no end, but rather a continuous return. The future is always connected to the past.

Esperanza thought that by leaving Mango Street and living in another house, one that she could point to with pride, she would leave behind forever an environment she believed to be only temporary. Esperanza will move away from the confining space of house and barrio, but paradoxically within them she has encountered a different sort of space, the space for writing. Through her creativity, she comes to inhabit the “house of storytelling” (Olivares, 1988, p.104). Esperanza longs for a House of her own: “Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man's house. Not a daddy's. A house all my own.” It is not a house she inherits from a father or inhabits with a husband, and there is “nobody to shake a stick at. Nobody's garbage to pick up after” (HMS, p.108). It is not a house where she will play the traditional role of homemaker and housekeeper. Instead her house will have only her things: “my porch and my pillow, my pretty purple petunias. My books and my stories” (HMS, p.108). It is clear, nonetheless, that a magical house is constructed through the creative imagination: “a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem” (HMS, p.108 emphasis added). It is significant to note not before a poem but the poem: the poem to come.
In the end the girl recognizes that she both belongs and does not belong to Mango Street. By the novel's end Esperanza has realized that her writing is one way to maintain the connection to Mango Street without having to give up her own independence. She will tell the stories of "the ones who cannot out" (HMS, p.110). Esperanza wants to leave but is unable, so she attains release from her confinement through her writing. Yet even here she never leaves Mango Street because, instead of fantasizing, she writes of her reality.

Gonzales and Rebolledo confirm that "the house is symbolic of consciousness and collective memory, and is a nourishing structure so that the narrator comes to understand that, despite her need for a space of her own, Mango Street is really a part of her, an essential creative part she will never be able to leave; consequently, she searches in (as narrator) and will return to (as author) her neighborhood for the human and historical materials of which [her] stories will be made" (1985, pp.109-119). In the elevated plane of her art Esperanza transcends her condition, finding another house, which is the space of literature. Yet what she writes about "third-floor flats, and fear of rats, and drunk husbands sending rocks through windows, anything as far from the poetic as possible reinforces her solidarity with the people, the women, of Mango Street" (Notebook 1987, pp. 69-73). This story itself is a symbolic return
to Mango Street. Esperanza needn’t physically come back, though she will. Instead, by sharing her story Esperanza will give strength to others. The novel, then, completes the circle; it is Esperanza’s return. One reason for this is her writing, which has made her strong. She plans to put it down on paper and then “the ghost does not ache so much” (HMS, p.110). What this means relative to other women's novels are that she reverses a trend. She is strong (something Mexican women should not be), perfectly aware of the problems with a patriarchal culture, and because of her love for her people, vows to return, and it is the writing, which gives her the strength. Thoroughly aware of the abusive nature of her culture, she comes to the decision that though she does not want to go back till “somebody makes it better” (HMS, p.107), she nevertheless chooses to return for the sake of the others. She is strong and, in contrast to Holden, feels drawn back, not just because she needs people, like Holden, but because they need her.

Esperanza's vision is not merely limited to the Mexican community, though Esperanza clearly represents the social, economic, and political situations of Mexican-Americans. More universally, though, Esperanza might be seen as the innocent set upon by the world, for Cisneros writes not only about the local human soil but also that of the entire country. “For the ones who cannot out” (HMS, p.110). Strictly
speaking, the sentence is ungrammatical, since ‘out’ is not a verb. Cisneros has chosen to break perceived rules of grammar perhaps because there is a relation between breaking grammar and breaking out of Mango Street. As Jayne E. March observes, “writing is essential in connecting Esperanza with female power; her promise to share that power with other women is fulfilled by the text itself.” Her writing helps her to make sense of the world around her and the women who are a part of that world. It is offered to "the ones I left behind" (110) and it offers the possibility that a woman can achieve anything in life if she can locate the strength and courage to leave confining situations and discover who she truly is. Cisneros's use of the journey is on one level an escape from an impossible circumstance, while on another each is a further step in Esperanza's journey toward awareness.

It may seem that Holden’s and Augie’s are really journeys while Mango Street is limited to a house and therefore “set—the opposite of a geographical quest.” But when, one looks at the patterns of the novel, what the boys go out to see simply comes past Esperanza. She is a girl and does not have the cultural opportunity to leave as they do. What is more important is that Mango Street continues a paradigm of growth where a young person encounters an outside world, evaluates it in relationship to herself, and then forges an identity, something that
includes her sexuality and the prominence of writing in her life. Ellen McCracken says that this character breaks new boundaries with her outward movement into "socio-political reality."³²

Although the book has closure, it is also open-ended in that it does not tell us whether Esperanza finds her ideal home. By the end of the narrative, Esperanza recognizes that she must someday 'return' to Mango Street empowered as a writer. The return will not necessarily be literal but rather symbolic, described as a circle. Dedicating her book A Las Mujeres/to the woman, Cisneros has come back for she argues, "the world of thousands of silent women...needs to be, must be recorded so that their stories can finally be heard." (76)

The book's dedication and the very last line of the book form a circle symbolic of remembering always to come back. Esperanza emerges from her journey a complete person – a hero, who has battled her inner dragons and won. By the end of the book, Esperanza finds her literary voice and discovers "her power is her own. She will not give it away" (HMS, p.89). This is an extremely powerful statement. Esperanza is referring to movie stars, but she also sees this as a characteristic within herself. This shows her contrast to the rest of her neighborhood, who just accept their present situation. Cisneros' genius has enabled the reader to accompany Esperanza on her journey towards self-realization.
B) Dreams of Girlhood: Breaking Boundaries - A Study of Carson McCullers': *The Member of the Wedding* (1946)

Despite a small literary output, Carson McCullers has generally been viewed as a novelist who produced an important body of work in the Southern gothic genre. All her novels are set in Georgia where she grew up maintaining that authors always reflect the place of their birth and cannot escape from its “voices and foliage and memory.”34 Though she kept her vow not to live in the South she repeatedly returned and retained an antagonism toward it as a region where one might be regarded as worth “no more than a load of hay.”35 It shows that her treatment of southern life has never been sentimental. More importantly, she used the harsh symbolism of southern life to re-create the universal failures and anxieties of the modern world. McCullers, who made personal alienation the explicit single concern of all her fiction, treats the solitude of the heart with both objectivity and compassion. The contemporary gothic novels are tales of tormented souls who view the world as a maze. A typical modern gothic theme involves rites of passage for the innocent into a violent world. In the grotesque world of McCullers' fiction her eccentric characters suffer from loneliness that she interpreted with deep empathy. The same futile quest for unity in love is a recurring theme in McCullers' fiction. This theme illustrates Fiedler's statement about modern Gothicism in the American novel “the primary meaning of the Gothic romance, then,
lies in its substitution of terror for love as a central theme." The figure at the center of McCullers' novel, in her confusion and desperation, is unable to find solace in another soul and therefore is terrified at her enforced solitude and inadequacy. This difficulty of belonging is one of McCullers' central themes; frequently overshadowing her concerns with identity, gender, and race. The theme of the modern gothic novel is, then, "spiritual isolation." Tennessee Williams sees the American gothic novel linked to the French Existentialist novel, with the common denominator being "a sense, an intuition, of an underlying dreadfulness in modern experience." In one of her essays (Esquire, Dec. 1959), McCullers has stated her conscious concern with this theme:

Spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my themes. My first book was concerned with this, almost entirely, and all of my books since, in one-way or another. Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about — people whose physical incapacity to love or receive love — their spiritual isolation.

It is this dreadfulness in our lives that has been the primary theme of McCullers' five novels. With skillful subtlety, with suggestions and forthright statements, by means of well realized characters and revealing episodes, she "circles her theme, coming closer and closer to its core, until she has encompassed and exposed its meaning." However, the "Gothic" label misses the essential point that McCullers is ultimately "the
artist functioning at the very loftiest symbolic level,” and if one must look for labels her work can be called “metaphysical." McCullers, therefore, used the physical incapacity of her grotesque figures as a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love. In The Member of the Wedding Frankie’s “physical incapacity” is used primarily as “a symbol of [her] spiritual incapacity … [her] spiritual isolation. She is not just the comic loser…. [She is] lonesome and McCullers’ lonesomeness are intended eventually to figure our own.” Moreover she tries to link this to the existential crisis of mankind and also the sociological crisis of the South exacerbated by racial strife.

In her stories characters who are often disabled (either emotionally or physically) attempt desperately to gain attention and compassion from those around them. The same fundamental pattern exists in all McCullers’ major works. But it is a pattern with a strange vision of life, in which, “an eternal flaw exists in the machinery of love which alone has the power to liberate man from his fate of spiritual isolation.” McCullers is her own inspiration for these stories. She led a difficult physical life with severe illness — strokes, heart disease, paralysis, and eventually cancer and was confined to a wheelchair for many of her later years. Indeed the novels are set within a framework of sickness and death which thus become the symbolic symptoms of the society, for failing to realize the existence of
time and the necessity of change. McCullers is a master of realistic narrative, revealing much insight into the tangled inner lives of human beings. Richard M. Cook perceptively notes how “she spoke for people who, in their trapped inwardness, could not speak for themselves, who loved without hope of being loved.” She had a “double vision,” what most of her characters tragically lack. It enabled her to see the “secret inwardness” and also the awkward sometimes frightening and often amusing outwardness of people. Her vision of human loneliness is a vision born of love (Cook, 1975, pp.126-27). In her most successful works McCullers could, as she once claimed, “become her characters, enter their lonely lives, the places where they lived. And without letting us lose sight of their awkward, sometimes frightening and often amusing outwardness, she let us see into their secret inwardness” (Cook, 1975, p.128).

Frankie Addams has, in the words of Berenice, fallen “in love with a wedding,” (MW, p.82) the result is not only suffering but violence. McCullers is also able to portray an uncertainty of identity and terror of the future beneath Frankie’s foolishness and irritability. Her best fiction transcends the idiosyncrasies and paradoxes of the provincial American South to address the complex metaphysical dilemma of the human condition.
Despite this suffering that inexorably dominated her life, she produced what Virginia Spencer Carr calls "an impressive literary legacy" — five novels, two plays, twenty short stories, two dozen pieces of nonfiction, and some poetry. Evaluation of this varied body of work reveals that even though she does not specify it as such, her grand theme is actually that of self-discovery, or its close variation — self-definition. In nearly every work conflict occurs within an individual who longs for close identification with others, but at the same time struggles for freedom, lack of responsibility, and self-centered control of outside forces. Again and again, McCullers creates central characters that are lost and are trying to find their way towards a fuller understanding of themselves as well as the world in which they live. In this way they become both private human beings and involved participants. One of the amazing things in considering McCullers is not only how many variations she created out of this theme "of spiritual isolation" in story after story, but also how early that vision was formulated. It is to be found in her very first story, *Sucker*, written when she was a seventeen-year-old schoolgirl. There the title character, Sucker, is an orphan, and therefore unrelated to the family with whom he lives. Sucker desperately wants to be loved, to become a member of the family.
The title of McCullers' highly acclaimed first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), might be a description of the core of every book. For her the truth of the fable is the truth of the heart. The novel is not concerned with abstractions about the structure of society or with ideological conflicts in the contemporary world. She has banished these sociological and intellectual matters from her fiction, narrowing its range in favor of memory and mood, and above all, feeling. "The function of the artist," she has written, "is to execute his own indigenous vision, and having done that, to keep faith with this vision." If to keep faith is to pursue consistently a single theme, then she has succeeded in operating in "a narrow field" but was able to "plough deep furrows." For everywhere in her fiction she works at variations on the theme of 'spiritual isolation. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* focuses on deaf-mute John Singer, who befriends four alienated characters who believe that only he can understand their plight. The novel also centers in the experiences of the adolescent Mick Kelly, a thirteen-year old girl who sacrifices her dream of becoming a concert pianist to take a job at Woolworth's department store. *Reflection in a Golden Eye* (1942) is a psychological horror story set in a military base. Both of the books have been filmed. *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1958) was considered one of McCullers' least successful works, but provides insight into her life and techniques. Many
critics viewed the play as McCullers' attempt to reconcile feelings of loss, guilt, and hostility resulting from the death of her husband, James Reeves and her mother. McCullers produced, *Clock without Hands*, in 1961. On August 15, 1967, she suffered a major stroke, slipped into a coma, and died on September 29. A posthumous publication of her uncollected writings, edited by her sister, Margarita Smith, appeared under the title *The Mortgaged Heart: The Previously Uncollected Writings of Carson McCullers* (1971).

In an appraisal of her life and work accompanying her front-page obituary in the September 30, 1967, *New York Times*, Eliot Fremont-Smith wrote of the impact of her first novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* in what could also be an assessment of McCullers' lasting influence:

> It is not so much that the novel paved the way for what became the American Southern gothic genre, but that it at once encompassed it and went beyond it . . . The heart of this remarkable, still powerful book is perhaps best conveyed by its title, with its sense of intensity, concision and mystery, with its terrible juxtaposition of love and aloneness, whose relation was McCullers' constant subject . . . McCullers was neither prolific nor varying in her theme . . . This is no fault or tragedy: to some artists a vision is given only once. And a corollary: only an artist can make others subject to the vision's force. McCullers was an artist. She was also in her person, an inspiration and example for other artists who grew close to her. Her books, and particularly 'The Heart,' will live; she will be missed.

McCullers was also awarded a Gold Medal by the Theatre Club, Inc. as the best playwright of the year. March 1946 saw the publication of
her fourth major work, *The Member of the Wedding*, which again won high critical acclaim. She adapted the novel for the stage where it became a Broadway hit in 1950, winning the *New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award*. In 1952 the play was turned into a successful motion picture. The book is framed around the main frustration of Frankie Addams, a young, confused twelve-year-old adolescent living in the American south in 1944, and who wants to escape her limited female/domestic sphere and act like a tomboy. The daughter of a jeweler, like McCullers and a mother who died in childbirth, she is precocious and stubborn, but also naïve and unaware of the reasons for her own emotions. The main action of the book, which begins on the last Friday in August and ends two days later, revolves round her obsession with her brother Jarvis's wedding on Sunday to Janice Evans. She seeks union with them and through them with all mankind. She is determined to forge an identity that transcends the self. Considerable biographical significance is attached to McCullers’ acknowledgement that the intensity informing the novel represented her mature “working through of old adolescent conflicts and regrets.” McCullers saw this novel and the play which developed from it as “poetic compositions” comprised of “fugue-like passages” (McDowell, 1980, p.81). In the elusive changes of mood, the relationships among characters, in the interplay among themes and metaphors, she sought; she said
“precision and harmony” much as a poet would. Lawrence Graver also observes that the novel is divided into three parts, a structure that calls attention to the rhythm of the novel. He explains: “the rhythm... follows the familiar journey of adolescent initiation: the stirrings of dissatisfaction, jubilant hope founded on misplaced idealism, and disillusionment accompanied by a new wisdom about the limits of human life.” Other critics have likened this three-part structure to that of a sonata, a type of musical piece that often has three parts. Based on biographical information about McCullers, these commentators believe that in The Member of the Wedding the author bridges her passion for music with her passion for writing. Ultimately, “the universality of music pervasively informs metaphor and background in McCullers’ work more than does a sense of her geographical region” (McDowell, 1980). One explanation is that McCullers has constructed the plot in such a way that the three-part structure pulls events into convergence. In doing this she might be representing the omniscient power of God through the omniscience of the author, seeing God in terms of an author figure. In fact she points out “writing is a search for God” and her belief coincides with what William Golding has said, “God is of all things an artist who labors under no compulsion but that of his infinite creativity.”
In part 1, under the ambiguous diminutive of Frankie, she has enjoyed the relative freedom of childhood as a tomboy. But now that she is nearing thirteen and is almost 5'6", she is outgrowing that stage in her life. Even McCullers was sensitive about her height (5'8"), and accentuated the difference in her appearance by dressing eccentrically. Her lifelong sense of herself as different and consequently as isolated pervades all of her books. Frankie’s rapid growth causes her to worry that she may be a freak, like those that so fascinate and repel her at the sideshow. Throughout the novel, Frankie is caught between the injunctions of those in authority in her life, who demand that she exercise common sense and reason — “From now on you walk the chalk line or you’ll have to be taught” (MW, p.53), and her own desperate need to fantasize about a connection with “something greater than [herself].” When she finds out that her older brother, Jarvis, and his girlfriend, Janice, have made plans to get married, Frankie becomes acutely aware that she is alone: “The trouble with me is that for a long time I have been just an 'I' person.” As she watches the young couple, she realizes that most people have “a we.” Frankie is in love with the bride and her brother and desperately wishes to accompany them on their honeymoon, believing that such an act will alleviate her loneliness and enable her to discover what she terms “the we of me” (MW, p.42). She suddenly
realizes who she is and where she is going. Seeing her role as a member of the wedding party as the perfect solution to her solitude, she begins to imagine that she will leave her old life behind and start a new one with the newlyweds, going with them “to whatever place that they will ever go” (MW. p.43).

Part 2 takes place the day before the wedding as the exuberant Frankie makes her plans to leave; she bids farewell to her town as though it has been poised to hear from her in her new identity as F. Jasmine Addams: “She decided to make herself some visiting cards with Miss F. Jasmine Addams, Esq., engraved with squinted letters on a tiny card” (MW, p.51). Her insistence on the right to take a new name lets Frankie reinvent herself. The persona of F. Jasmine is an attempt to explore and preserve her androgynous options. Frankie had made up the name Jasmine to strengthen the bond (alliteratively) with her brother and his bride, Jarvis and Janice. As the instability of her name indicates, she is beset by the question of identity.

Part 3 is a brief coda that reports the events after the wedding when Frankie painfully discovers the reality of the situation and finally accepts her formal given name, Frances, and with it her legal and socially prescribed identity as a young woman. Barbara White notes “the irony that in gaining her membership, Frances appears to have lost her self.”52
But, as with Mick (*Lonely Hunter*) this loss may be the price of negotiating the distance between childhood and womanhood.

Like Esperanza (*The House of Mango Street*) Frankie must also overcome a patriarchal society, struggle with problems of awakening sexuality, death and family displacement to establish a sense of self-confidence. She too relies on a network of women to guide her through her evolution into independent womanhood. Her constant companions are Bernice, an African-American maid who knows the harshness of the outside world that Frankie longs to see, and John Henry, Frankie's 6-year-old cousin. With great complexity and realism, McCullers embodies the same problems of adolescence as in *The Catcher in the Rye*. Both novels focus on the failure of the adolescence to adjust to the confusions of the adult world and ‘belong’ to a group of people. But there is one major difference. Frankie is looking to growing up so that she can fit in with the people around her while Holden wants to avoid adulthood completely as he sees the adult world as being false and corruptible.

Other themes, which relate more directly to the Gothic, can be found in McCullers' treatment of taboo. Homosexuality and perversion are often explicit in her work, and the mental imbalance of these characters is symbolized by their physical infirmity. Although McCullers depicted homosexual characters, the theme of homosexuality was set into
a broader context of alienation and dislocation in modern culture. These characters are so tormented that they feel compelled to perform such actions as Jake Blount's driving a nail through his outstretched palm (*Lonely Hunter*), Sherman Pew's hanging his friend's dog by a clothesline (*Clock Without Hands*), and Alison Langdon's cutting off her nipples with garden shears (*Reflections in a Golden Eye*). These are violent actions and often the criticism is raised that McCullers' novels contain too many such scenes. The inclusion of such atrocities is prompted by both the central theme and the symbolic method of her work. In a sense the theme of her novels is violation — the ravaging of the spirit by a cruel universe. By means of theme, symbol, and style McCullers has thrown some light upon "the dark corners of the mind" and human experience. McCullers seems to have been concerned with a larger vision in which the abnormal is used for a functional purpose. Her novels are grotesque in form only: repulsively hunchbacked or frightfully oversized characters, but inwardly not evil. The original Gothic novels employed grotesquely featured people as personifications of the evil in the world; McCullers' monsters, however, are ugly because their appearance is a projection of their internal suffering. Instead of being the menace, they are the victims of such menace. Hugo McPherson notes in an article, which appeared in Tamarack Review, "her characters, like Kafka's and Truman Capote's, are
the ill prepared and the ill equipped; they seek not victory over life but a secure haven, and the struggle is not a glory but an almost unbearable violation of the self.”\textsuperscript{54} The unfortunate characters are so affected by these deformities or maladies that they withdraw into the world of self. Such loneliness and frustration are portrayed in another set of characters as well. Supplementing the freaks in her novels are the self-conscious adolescents. Members of this group are equally isolated, belonging neither to the child's world or the adult's.

A third classification in the novels is of characters belonging to minority groups: the violated Negroes and persecuted Jews who suffer in their segregation. In their search for identity, which becomes inwardly directed, these characters are like the heroines of the Gothicists, whose flights were from “out of the known world into a dark region of make-believe.”\textsuperscript{55} Having failed to understand man's inhumanity to man and their own personal dissociation, her characters resort to daydreaming, and are plagued by horrible nightmares — a fate far worse than physically battling the rigors of the universe; for as Fiedler exclaims, “The final horrors are neither gods nor demons, but intimate aspects of our own minds” (Phillips, 1964, pp.59-72). All of McCullers' characters are doomed to solitary confinement within the self, of being caught, or left out as an alien in a strange land, symbolized in the corresponding images
of the “prisoner caged in a stone cell with iron bars before the windows” (MW, p.123) and of the chain that both connects and isolates people. Sometimes they make pitiful attempts at escape — as in the child Frankie’s running away from home down the state highway or Bernice Sadie Brown’s replacing her bad eye with one of light blue glass in The Member of the Wedding. Another source of escape is the recourse to the inner room — a very private place full of plans in other words, the inner self. Frankie’s retreats into the “inside room” of imagination provide some relief, as do the restless rambles about her small southern hometown. The seashell on Frankie's desk stands for the warm wash of the Gulf of Mexico (MW, p.11) her glass snow globe reminds her of cool Alaska, and the wedding proves more attractive because it takes place in “Winter Hill” (MW, p.7). Lying also embellishes uneventful life, which provides a form of vicarious pleasure. Yet inevitably, man is brought back from fanciful flights. Such attempts to change one's situation, to avoid reality, are futile. Without exception these wishful dreams are thwarted by the onslaughts of reality and only the nightmares materialize. “What she conceives to be the truth about human nature is a melancholy truth: each man is surrounded by a ‘Zone of loneliness,’ serving a life sentence of solitary confinement.” Although her novels do not deal directly with physical imprisonment, her characters are "caught" both
symbolically and literally in a variety of ways. Frankie resists a "jail you
could not see" (MW, p.157). She is estranged from family, friends, the
town, even trees and flowers, and struggles to break from the confines of
her kitchen, the backyard, and her ambivalent self. Her solution to the
problem, which would allow her the membership she craves, is destined
to fail.

_The Member of the Wedding_ is rich in symbolism, which gives the
novel greater depth. Marguerite Young, called McCullers "a poetic
symbolist, a seeker after those luminous meanings, which always do
transcend the boundaries of the stereotyped, the conventional, and the so­
called normal." Symbolic uses of colors, seasons, the family kitchen,
the Frankie — Berenice — John Henry triad, names, and music give the
reader another pathway of insight into Frankie’s confused psyche.
McCullers uses these symbolic elements in such a way that they do not
intrude upon the story or seem superimposed on the narrative; rather, they
flow naturally from the story while encouraging the reader to investigate
them further. In the end, the reader not only understands the character
better but also has a better idea of who she will become, which is what
Frankie seeks to know herself. Further, a deeper understanding of Frankie
as a typical angst-ridden adolescent enables the reader to better
understand the human experience in general. Leslie Fiedler has stated in
An End to Innocence “images of childhood and adolescence haunt our
greatest works as an unintended symbolic confession of the inadequacy
we sense but cannot remedy” (Phillips, 1964, pp. 59-72). In The Member
of the Wedding (1946) the use of the adolescent as a symbol for that sense
of inadequacy and helplessness is intentional. McCullers sees the figure
of the groping adolescent as another symbolic realization of a life of fear.
Fiedler writes “the child's world is not only asexual, it is terrible: the
world of fear and loneliness, a haunted world.” To this group belong
Mick Kelly of The Heart is a lonely Hunter, Frankie Addams of The
Member of the Wedding, and Sherman Pew of Clock Without Hands who
belong neither to the adult world nor to the world of childhood. Like
Sucker, they rebel; their rebellion is against such natural phenomena as
menstruation, sexuality, and premature death. McCullers’ chief characters
possess an ambiguous and troubled sexuality. Some of the characters
have asexual names like Mick and Frankie, who hesitate between boyish
and girlish behavior in reaction to the restrictions of American
womanhood. She hovers between thinking of herself as a boy (short hair,
short pants) and a vamp (her fancy dress-up garb in which she barely
escapes being raped) and solves her problem by trying to be a member of
her brother’s wedding, part of an adventurous threesome who will travel
through the world together. The awakening occurs, of course, when she
finds that the bride and groom have other plans and that she is consigned
to the waiting room of adolescence until she conforms to feminine norms.
The self-chosen nickname of Frankie is a feeble effort on the part of the
adolescent to assert her individuality in a patriarchal culture, as is the
crew cut, which makes her a neuter being. Others are inverted sexually,
their deviation further isolating them from the normal world. Like
Frankie in *The Member of the Wedding*, Carson McCullers at thirteen
renamed herself dropping the Lula, her feminine first name in favor of
her gender-neutral middle name.

At the beginning of the novel, McCullers writes: “Standing
beside the arbor, with the dark coming on, Frankie was afraid. She did not
know what caused this fear, but she was afraid” (MW, p.8). Frankie is
plagued by many nightmares and terrible visions. It is for this reason that
the novel can be called Gothic. Frankie's fears are the fears of all human
beings, and the last name of Addams indicates her archetypal function in
her initiation into worldly knowledge. Frankie, who until age twelve has
been comfortably unconventional, running with the neighborhood kids in
the small southern town, presenting shows underneath “the scuppernong
arbor” (MW, p.8) now suddenly feels like “an unjoined person who
[hangs] around in doorways” (MW, p.3), who has emotions she cannot
put to words, who feels: “afraid of these things that made her suddenly
wonder who she was, and what she was going to be in the world, and why she was standing at that minute, seeing a light, or listening, or staring up into the sky: alone. She was afraid, and there was a queer tightness in her chest” (MW, p.24). The introductory page gives us the pattern for the whole novel: expansion and entrapment.

Displaced and unattached, Frankie belongs to no group that she values or that values her. Frankie feels the eternal outsider. She cries in anguish over her plight:

She was an I person who had to walk around and do things by herself. All other people had a we to claim, all other except her. When Bernice said we, she meant Honey and Big Mama, her lodge, or her church. The we of her father was the store. All members of clubs have a we to belong to and talk about. The soldiers in the army can say we, and even the criminals on chain-gangs. But the old Frankie had had no we to claim. (MW, p.42)

Frankie watches the soldiers who travel in loud groups about the town, and envies their strong camaraderie. The girls with whom she associated in the past have now barred Frankie from the clubhouse where they have parties with boys, telling her she’s too young and mean. Further they are “spreading it all over town that Frankie smells bad” (MW, p.12). She not only is excluded from the girls' club because she is bigger and seems older than the rest, but she has also been turned out from her father's bed, which she used to share as a child. Despite Royal Addams's gruff nature and apparent insensitivity to his daughter's needs, McCullers
treats him sympathetically. Addams is, in fact, as close a rendering of her own father as the author dared put on paper. Frankie notes that her father “walked the dawn-stale kitchen like a person who has lost something, but has forgotten what it is that he has lost. Watching him, the old grudge was forgotten, and she felt sorry” (MW, p.52). Spurned by her father and the girls her age, Frankie seeks solace in the company of John Henry, her little cousin. This relationship is unsatisfactory, since John Henry is too young to share many of her interests. Frankie's feelings for him are partly motivated by her quest for a father figure, since her own father is too busy running his jewelry store. John Henry partially fills this gap in her life, and Frankie thinks he looks “like a tiny watchmaker” (MW, p.9). Frankie has felt neglect and isolation to the point that she wails, “I am sick unto death” (MW, p.17).

One dream, which frightens Frankie, is of a beckoning door, which slowly begins to open and draw her in. “I dreamed there was a door, I was just looking at it and while I watched, it began slowly to open” (MW, p.127). What lies beyond that door — maturity, truth, knowledge — is a mystery to her, and the unknown frightens her. Frankie is afraid of her own growth. Having grown four inches in the past year, she towers above her classmates and is fearful that she will become a Freak “and what would be a lady who is over nine feet high? She would
be a Freak” (MW, p.19). Figuring that at this rate she will ultimately be over nine feet tall, Frankie fears that she will soon only be welcomed in the traveling fair that comes to town, where she will take her place with the Pin Head, the Alligator Boy, and the Half-Man Half-Woman, who all seem to look “at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers, as though to say: We know you” (MW, p.20). Frankie feels the grotesques have recognized her own freakish and guilt-ridden soul.

Her fears, when combined with the rejection of her former friends, create in Frankie a strong desire to be normal, though she is not at first clear about how that might be achieved. Frankie’s visit to the carnival’s Freak House, where she has been terrified by the knowing eyes of the grotesques she sees that it is not the only place that frightens the girl: “the jail had scared and haunted her that spring and summer” (MW, p.123). She also feels the ghastly looking prisoners know her for what she is — and that she too is trapped, though she is free to move about and they are not. The very existence of the jail house haunts her: “the criminals were caged in stone cells with iron bars before the windows, and though they might beat on the stone walls or wrench at the iron bars, they could never get out” (MW, p.123). Frankie imagines herself so trapped, and her confidante, Bernice Sadie Brown, reveals to her that it is the human predicament. Bernice feels the burden of the color of her own skin,
symbolized by her last name ‘Brown’. She brings to Frankie her pessimistic philosophy of man's fate, simply by remarking, “they were born ... and they going to die.” (MW, p.120)

Berenice and Frankie have discussion about being “loose” or “caught” in the world. Frankie tries to communicate her feeling of being trapped to Berenice, who expresses it eloquently:

We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don't know why. But we caught anyhow. I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. (MW, p.119)

Berenice is describing people being caught in their own individual identities and being ultimately isolated. It is usually forgotten, however, that Berenice goes on to define a special way of being caught. She says she is caught worse:

Because I am black... Because I am colored. Everybody is caught one way or another. But they done draw completely extra bounds around all colored people. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself. So we caught that first way I was telling you, as all human beings is caught. And we caught as colored peoples also. Sometimes a boy like Honey [Berenice's foster brother] feel like he just can't breathe no more. He feel like he got to break something or break himself. Sometimes it just about more than we can stand... He just feels desperate like. (MW, p.119)

Berenice says this to express understanding of F. Jasmine's ruminations over the notion of being sectored away from other people, trapped in a cell that cannot bond with others in the world. From
Berenice's perspective, this means also to be caught as a black person in a world that discriminates against minorities. Berenice says that one is caught in the sense that one is born black or white and cannot change that. Being a black woman, she knows that her color further traps her because of discrimination. So F. Jasmine points out a kind of dichotomy in the situation Berenice has articulated. Frankie says about people,

People loose and at the same time caught. Caught and loose. All these people and you don't know what joins them up. Yet at the same time you almost might use the word loose instead of caught. Although they are two opposite words (MW, p.119)

Frankie's responses to Berenice are significant. To the first statement she says she "doesn't know" but to the second that she knows how Honey feels. "Sometimes I feel like I want to break something, too. I feel like I wish I could just tear down the whole town" (MW, p.120). In other words, Frankie believes she is caught in a special way other than the first one Berenice explained. Berenice, having accepted the female role, does not mention the extra bounds drawn around women, but Frankie feels them keenly. Frankie sees how at the same time one is caught in one's entrapment because of the inability to connect with other people. The overwhelming feeling of disconnectedness serves as a challenge to F. Jasmine to break the rules of society and to live by her own laws. This moment also serves as a powerful statement against the separation of the
races and makes a statement for unity. Further, we need to look at the role Berenice serves in the story. She is a voice of reason, the wise antidote to Frankie's antics. At the time this book was written, there was great prejudice against blacks, particularly in the south. So it also makes a larger social statement about the state of racist discrimination in the 1940s American south. McCullers works to challenge stereotypes by creating an intelligent character who is black. She uses Berenice to articulate a stand against a world in which old societal rules are so engrained that they are stifling and harmful. It puts F. Jasmine's transition from childhood to maturity on the same plane as society's need to mature beyond petty racist discrimination of the 40s, while also allowing for sharp, often penetrating commentaries about society and its entrenched hypocrisies. It makes F. Jasmine's struggle timeless. In the same way that she is trying to connect with other people, and break down boundaries, so is Berenice wishing to end the division between black and white and to find a husband to love in the way she once loved Ludie, her dead husband. But her strength is derived from an essential grounded ness: she's nestled in her church community and her Christian vision of the world.

In the course of the summer Frankie is haunted by three gruesome deaths of acquaintances. McCullers describes these deaths in very graphic
terms, the verbal intensity matching the strong impressions made upon Frankie's mind. The first of these is the senseless murder of the Negro boy, Lon Baker, in the alley directly behind her father's jewelry store: “On an April afternoon his throat was slashed with a razor blade, and all the alley people disappeared in back doorways, and later it was said his cut throat opened like a crazy shivering mouth that spoke ghost words into the April sun” (MW, p.92). The silent flapping mouth of Lon's throat parallels Frankie's own inarticulate attempts at communication. The death of her Uncle Charles is more immediate to Frankie, and his ghastly passing heightens her awareness of mortality and her own insignificance in the cosmos. She fears death: “He looked like an old man carved in brown wood and covered with a sheet. Only his eyes had moved ... She had stood in the doorway staring at him— then tiptoed away, afraid” (MW, p.76). Again Frankie is aghast not only because of the pain involved in dying, but also because of the hopeless inability of the dying to communicate to the living. She remembers those she has known who have died who “feel nothing, hear nothing, and see nothing: only black” (MW, p.94), and she is struck by the terrible finality of it all. Although she had declared earlier that she would shoot herself in the head with her father's pistol if the bride and her brother did not take her with them, she couldn't pull the trigger because “deadness was blackness, nothing but
pure terrible blackness that went on and on and never ended until the end of all the world” (MW, p.153).

The greatest shock however comes with the death of John Henry, her only young friend. Sickly and frail, John Henry in his confinement had become associated in Frankie's mind with her own isolation. The two of them seemed to share the same condition as recluse and even outcasts. She not only pities John Henry because he is sickly; she also pities him because in the doomed John Henry she sees herself: “He looked at her with eyes as china as a doll's and in them there was only the reflection of her own lost face” (MW, p.158). Frankie ponders her new knowledge of mortality as well as her increasing inventory of sexual facts and realizes that she must protect John Henry's innocence, to keep him a child as long as possible. John Henry gets meningitis, which first makes him blind, and ten days later the illness kills him. After his death, Frankie remembers John Henry the way he was before the illness and not his sickly “solemn, hovering and ghost-gray” (MW, p.159) self. With the loss of this rapport, Frankie finally feels that any meaning to her life has vanished. All that remains is the spirit of John Henry, which seems to visit her. Time and again she is to recall his torturous death: “John Henry had been screaming for three days and his eyeballs were walled up in a corner, stuck and blind. He lay there finally with his head drawn back in a buckled way,
and he had lost the strength to scream. He died the Tuesday after the Fair was gone” (MW, p.162).

This last statement reveals much of what Frankie has had to learn. After the fair — the brief pleasantries of life — comes the blackness of death. While many readers find his death unexpected, his passing is highly symbolic of the passing of Frankie’s childhood years. Standing in the kitchen, she feels that she can sense his presence. She will not forget her childhood years, but she realizes that they are in her past. Moreover when Berenice said, “I don’t see why he has to suffer so...the word suffer was one [Frankie] could not associate with John Henry, a word she shrank from as before an unknown hollow darkness of the heart” (MW, p.161 emphasis added). *The Member of the Wedding* is more than a novel of one girl’s initiation into knowledge; it is impossible to read the account of John Henry’s death and still regard the work as simply a charming account of adolescence as many critics have done. In it’s cataloging of death scenes the novel plays upon the universal fear of death, a characteristic theme of Gothic novels.

There are two major components in the theme of the novel: The Rules of Life that Separate One Person from Another. The first is the concept of division between people. In the very second sentence of the book McCullers writes that “this was the summer when for a long time
(Frankie) had not been a member” (MW, p.3). McCullers title, most obviously, refers to Frankie’s only desire in life: to belong. This, she believes, will reverse the bleak circumstances of her life, making her complete and thus valued by others. This signals to us that Frankie’s attempt to find unity with other people serves as the main conflict of the novel. McCullers skillfully explores the poignancy, pathos, and banality of life, especially through Frankie’s marginalization by her own sense of difference and alienation in her town. Berenice helps Frankie to understand with greater empathy what a struggle it is for minorities to deal with the division between the races: “But they done draw completely extra bonds around all colored people. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself” (MW, p.119). The second element to the theme has to do with life’s universal rules. As Frankie attempts to grow up and seek membership into the adult world, she discovers that certain life rules encumber her. The most important rule has to do with the fact that married couples only include two people, shutting Frankie out of her dream of becoming a threesome with Janice and Jarvis: “Fool’s hill. You have a whole lot less of sense than I was giving you credit for. What makes you think they want to take you along with them? Two is company and three is a crowd. And that is the main thing about a wedding”(MW, p.78).
The novella is also filled with descriptions of dividing lines, of rifts between people, of split personalities. "Her father went back behind the gray sour velvet curtain that divided the store into two parts, the larger public part in front and behind a small dusty private part" (MW, p.65 emphasis added). This quote describes the jewelry store Mr. Addams works in, when Frankie visits him and learns about Uncle Charles's death. The duality described in this quote represents several things. It signifies the shift between adulthood and childhood. Frankie is in a kind of indeterminate state waiting on the dividing line between the two points. And the duality speaks of the difference between the public and private selves, as well as the conscious and unconscious. Frankie changes her name to F. Jasmine to create the surface impression of childhood. However, we know that inside she is still a child, creating wild illogical fantasies that will inevitably disappoint her. She is someone who has very little understanding of her unconscious motivations or instinctual fears. All of these serve as metaphors for the fact that there is a gulf between Frankie and the rest of the world. Other examples are the fact that Big Mama describes Honey as someone God never finished and "he was eternally unsatisfied" (MW, p.129). Honey Brown who "just can't breathe no more," (MW, p.119) is Frankie's double in the novel. Frankie feels a kinship with him because she senses that he is in the same divided state
that she is. On the one hand, Honey works hard studying music and French; on the other, he “suddenly runs hog-wild all over Sugarville and tears around for several days, until his friends bring him home more dead than living” (MW, p.128). Honey could “talk like a white schoolteacher” (MW, p.128) but he often adopted his expected role with a vengeance; “speaking with a colored word, and a dark sound from the throat that can mean anything” (MW, p.128) that even his family couldn’t understand.

Honey spends only part of his energy trying to overcome or protesting against the limitations placed on him; the rest of the time he accepts society’s label of “inferior” and punishes himself.

Frankie exhibits this same psychology. She frequently “hates herself,” and her attempts at rebellion against the female role are mainly symbolic. As Simone de Beauvoir puts it, the young girl “is too much divided against herself to join battle with the world; she limits herself to a flight from reality or a symbolic struggle against it.” Beauvoir mentions four common forms of “symbolic struggle”: odd eating habits, kleptomania, self-mutilation, and running away from home. While Frankie never carries these behaviors to extremes, she indulges in all four types. She eats greedily, pilfers at ‘five-and-ten,’ hacks at her foot with a knife, and tries to run away. It is characteristic of these acts that, like Honey’s rampages, they are ineffective — the young girl is “struggling in
her cage rather than trying to get out of it” (Beauvoir, 1988, p.333). At the end of the novel we find Honey in an actual prison and Frankie in a jail of her own making. The adult Honey laughs at her solution to racism that he go to Cuba and pretend to be “a Cuban” (MW, p.131). Frankie’s principal ‘flight from reality’ is her creation of a fantasy world, escaping to the haven of her dreams where she can fly airplanes and see the whole world. Her favorite pastime with Berenice and John Henry is their game of criticizing God and putting themselves in the position of creator: “They would judge the work of God, and mention the ways how they would improve the world.” Frankie agrees with the basic modifications Berenice would make. The world would be “just and reasonable” (MW, p.96): “There would be no colored people and no white people to make the colored people feel cheap and sorry all through their lives. No colored people, but all human men and ladies and children as one loving family on the earth... no Jews murdered anywhere,... no war and no hunger” (MW, p.97). Frankie makes a major addition, however. “She planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted” (MW, p.97). This plan provides a neat symbolic solution to Frankie’s conflicts. John Henry frequently illustrates this ability to change back and forth by suddenly showing up in Frankie’s cast off dresses and playing with dolls. Bernice says “Lily Mae
fell in love with a man named Juney Jones. A man, mind you. And Lily Mae turned into a girl. He changed his nature and his sex and turned into a girl” (MW, p.81). Biff, *(Lonely Hunter)* is shown becoming so after his wife dies. He takes over some of her feminine habits, discarding the clearly defined role, which had previously confined him. If McCullers implies any solution besides racial equality to the social injustice and personal isolation and despair she portrays in her novels, it is a move toward the loosening of conventional gender roles, towards the more androgynous world Frankie envisions when she wishes people could “change back and forth from boys to girls.” Even as a child before her family and society insists on her feminine gender role, Frankie is aware that she has individual power. In their study of tomboyism in American culture, Sharon O’Brien and Louise Westling explain that tomboyism is considered a stage to be outgrown because girls must learn to replace active 'masculine' behaviors with passive 'feminine' behaviors. Frankie and Mick share artistic temperaments and serious ambitions as tomboys until “safe conformity triumphs” and they are forced to give up their boyish ways and creativeness. The adolescent girl, in McCullers’ fiction, has the problem not only of “sex awareness but also of sex determination. It is not the responsibility of womanhood that she reluctantly must take up but the decision to be a woman at all that she must make.”
decision to be a woman confronting Frankie accounts in large part for her fear and forms a major thematic concern of the novel. However, Frankie is “hovering between the two sexes” (Eisinger, p.250) in the sense that she is a girl who does not want to relinquish the privileges of boys. Frankie exists in a divided state: while she hesitates to stay in childhood, she cannot fulfill her desire to be grown-up without accepting her identity as female, and she already suspects that her gender will be confining. Frankie thus vacillates between striving for adult status and resisting it. Frankie's reluctance to remain a child is shown in her outrage at being given a doll by her brother Jarvis and his fiancée. She also resents being addressed as a child and peppers her own language with such grown-up phrases as “sick unto death” (MW, p.17), “son-of-a-bitches” (MW, p.12) and “irony of fate” (MW, p.14). But merely labeling Frankie as a tomboy overlooks a larger issue in society: power. Men have power in the world, women do not, and Frankie wants power. As a child, by adopting masculine attributes, Frankie is attempting to seize the social power that is denied to females. It is this masculine or tomboy power that Frankie is not willing to give up, even when she reaches adulthood. Girls turning into women are taught to be feminine or passive, thus losing their power, but a boy becoming a man is taught to be masculine or assertive, thus gaining power. Frankie's personality and behavior are not the result of
individual psychological causes; her behavior is the result of a larger societal issue — a patriarchal society in which women are subjected to suffering causing immeasurable frustration in them. The only time that Frankie felt complete was when she was a child, when she could be both feminine and masculine. The gender construct of a tomboy represents her longing for the time when she could be both feminine and masculine — when she would feel the full joy of being alive. This description signifies a new beginning for Frankie, and the possibility is there for her to go on and rebuild her life, guided by the attributes of caring, loving, nurturing, and yet being strong and determined when the need arises. The ending of McCullers novel is positive with regard to Frankie's achieving gender completeness — both masculine and feminine — making her a complete, complex female. The terms of Frankie's life then will be easy because she is now a whole person. McCullers speaks to our patriarchal society — with its rigid dictum of separate spheres for men and women and corresponding enforced gender roles emphasizing the need to expand and blur the boundaries and categories of male/female and masculine/feminine. Perhaps Jung's most important contribution to psychology is his recognition that a fully developed individual personality must transcend gender.
When F. Jasmine questions Bernice as to why it is illegal to change one's name without the consent of the court, the cook responds, "You have a name and one thing after another happens to you, and you behave in various ways and do things, so that soon the name begins to have a meaning" (MW, p.113). The sense of the awful mystery of life is particularly acute in the conversations between Frances and Berenice. Berenice's theme is, simply, the prevalence of a random determinism: "Things will happen," (MW, p.115) as she puts it, and we are inextricably woven into the patterns that bring those things to us. They are trapped in the pattern, but the pattern is inscrutable; "somehow," says Frances, "I can't seem to name it." Frances has three names, each symbolic of a stage in the pattern of her life. In one sense, her behavior in each stage gives meaning to the name imparting a certain shape or color to a portion of the pattern. In a larger sense, however, it is the pattern that produces behavior and, through that, controls us. No matter how one might change externals, it is only when one's innermost feelings are altered that one truly changes and grows. Frankie functions on both universal and gender-specific levels, as her names suggest. As Frankie, she is an "adolescent everyman" in her awkward, agonized movement toward maturation. But at the same time, she bears the "special burden of girlhood," which complicates her transition to adult status. The most obvious sign of Frankie's projected
change of identity from child to adult is her revision of her name from Frankie to F. Jasmine. While Frankie is a child's name, F. Jasmine sounds older. Frankie chooses Jasmine partly because the initial \textit{Ja} matches the \textit{Ja} of \textit{Jarvis and Janice}, but Jasmine, associated with sweet fragrance and pale yellow flowers, has obvious, romantic, feminine connotations. Growing up necessitates shedding a masculine name, clothing, and acquiring feminine ones. In many ways Frankie wants to make this change. With the name F. Jasmine she vows to give up being "rough and greedy" (MW, p.83). Most important, she attempts to change her appearance.

Frankie feels there is no escape from her fate, and she hates her environment, thinking she "lived in the ugliest house in town," (MW, p.41) viewing the sunshine as "the bars of a bright, strange jail" (MW, p.80). Through such imagery the author deliberately gives us another trapped, suffering and helpless female. Frankie’s problem is that same sense of spiritual isolation, which blights all the McCullers characters: "Between herself and all other places there was a space like an enormous canyon she could not hope to bridge or cross" (MW, p.157). The sense of being trapped is developed in greater detail where the very setting of the novel is symbolically designed to reflect Frankie’s feelings of being limited and restricted. The kitchen of the Addams home is a place of
confinement and dread for Frankie. Spurned by the other girls because of her unusual size, Frankie finds herself continually sitting in the dark kitchen whose very walls she hates. The kitchen is Frankie's private hell, "a sad and ugly room," and is most often described by McCullers as "gray" (MW, p.6). Frankie often feels she will go berserk if she has to remain there any longer. Indeed the kitchen is like "a room in the crazy-house" (MW, p.6) because John Henry has covered the walls with queer and childish drawings which run together in confusion: "The walls of the kitchen bothered Frankie — the queer drawings of Christmas trees, airplanes, freak, soldiers, flowers" (MW, p.9). Such varied drawings make the walls a projection of the world itself. Frankie in her confinement seems to sense this, staring at the walls and commenting, "The world is certainly a small place" (MW, p.6).

McCullers first introduces her theory of love, a theory, which predominates in her succeeding book, *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Berenice rambles on to Frankie about the unpredictable nature of man in choosing a beloved: "I have knews men to fall in love with girls so ugly you wonder if their eyes is straight. I have seen some of the most peculiar weddings anybody could conjecture. Once I knew a boy with his whole face burned off so that...." (MW, p.80) Here McCullers tells us that in matters of love the appearance of the beloved is less important than the
reciprocity of the emotion. The important thing is the release from isolation, which the act of loving gives to the lover. Even Berenice has suffered as a result of her seemingly perfect union with Ludie Freeman. Since his death she has felt a terrible void: “Sometimes I almost wish I had never knew Ludie at all. It spoils you too much. It leaves you too lonesome afterward” (MW, p.93). But being mortal, Ludie too had to die and cause grief to his beloved.

Berenice's search for love parallels Frankie's, though in a later stage of life. But Berenice possesses the worldly knowledge that Frankie lacks. Berenice helps expand the novel's theme of the separation between two entities. She is herself split. She has one dark eye and one glass blue eye, thus her physicality has both black and white attributes. The blue glass eye she has bought gives her "a two-sighted expression" (MW, p.27), which is the physical symbol of her psychic perception. This split plays on the major theme of division and reveals her inner conflict: she is torn between her desires to remain young and free or to settle down with T.T. Berenice's blue glass eye is like Frankie's dream of the impossible wedding, a dream of almost heavenly harmony on earth. She does not precisely dream of turning white, but her blue glass eye is a terrible commentary on the color line and the arbitrary divisions, which isolate people from each other. Frankie's innocence is contrasted with Berenice’s
experience of four marriages. Her last three marriages have left her unsatisfied. She hysterically calls out for Ludie Maxwell Freeman. These subsequent marriages were desperate attempts to replace him. She marries Jamie Beale because he has a mangled thumb like Ludie. She marries Henry Johnson because he wears Ludie's pawned greatcoat. "What I did," confesses the miserable Berenice "was to marry off little pieces of Ludie whenever I came across them. It was just my misfortune they all turned out to be the wrong pieces" (MW, p.107).

Both Frankie and Berenice have one opportunity for momentary escape from their dreadful ennui and frustration. The announcement of a wedding for Frankie's older brother Jarvis excites their imagination, especially Frankie's. Love-hungry, she decides that she will join her brother and his bride and travel to Alaska with them, away from the heat and confinement of the South. McCullers, like Hemingway, uses the snowy North as a symbol for escape to a pristine and pure ideal. She writes of a "no exit world," (Hughes, 1961, p.75) and it is not accidental that all her novels are set in the slow, unbearably hot and monotonous summer months when the town turns "black and shrunken under the glare of the sun," (MW, p.3) and the sidewalks seem to be on fire, in fact, an inferno. In Member, as in her other novels, McCullers uses heat to suggest boredom and restriction and cold to suggest liberation. Frankie
dreams of snow and ice where Jarvis and Janice blend with her ideals because he was stationed in Alaska and Janice comes from a town called Winter Hill. But the reality of Frankie's environment is the deadening heat. McCullers references to heat and stasis create an effect of constriction, almost suffocation that parallels Frankie's feeling of tightness in her chest — “her squeezed heart beating against the table edge” (MW, p.6). The more aware women become, the more they feel with Sylvia Plath that they are encased by social stereotypes in the “bell jar as a glass cage of 'femininity' and powerlessness in which many women sit, in and out of asylums, and from which many are trying to escape.”63 Since the search for identity puts greater pressures on women than it does on men, these women choose to create their own alternatives and escape into brave new worlds. The “bell jar” image also occurs in The Member of the Wedding where Frankie perceives her environment as “the world seemed to die each afternoon and nothing moved any longer. At last the summer was like a green sick dream, or like a silent crazy jungle under glass” (MW, p.3 emphasis added). The Member of the Wedding portrays the hot summer of an adolescent girl's experience, which at the very end of the novel gives way to a chilly autumn. The seasonal motif suggests the possibility of renewal; perhaps “spring will return” for Frankie.
Though Frankie fears Big Mama she turns to her supernatural powers in her search for answers to the ultimate question of human suffering, the problem of evil and death. She learns that she will indeed take a journey the next day, but that she will eventually return. But Frankie is not satisfied with the answers she gives her, and she is left with her feeling of “the sense of something terribly gone wrong” (MW, p.147).

The old sense of separateness returns and she tells Berenice:

Doesn't it strike you as strange that I am I, and you are you? I am F. Jasmine Addams. And you are Berenice Sadie Brown. And we can look at each other, and touch each other, and stay together year in and year out in the same room. Yet always I am I, and you are you. And I can't ever be anything else but me, and you can't ever be anything else but you. (MW, pp.114-115)

Frankie tells Berenice that she wants to know everybody in the whole world and that going off with Janice and Jarvis after the wedding will make it happen. Her obsession to be joined in a “we of me” with her brother and his bride is extended now to include the whole human race, and she is determined to become the sum of all she imagines. Frankie’s need for a close family experience is partially fulfilled because as a bridesmaid, she would finally be “a member of the wedding,” and would be given an identity that allows her the “we of me”:

At last she knew just who she was and understood where she was going. She loved her brother and the bride and she was a member of the wedding. The three of them would go into the world and they would always be together. And finally, after
the scared spring and the crazy summer, she was no more afraid. (MW, p.46)

Frankie finds meaning in her life in the belief that she is a member at last. This exemplifies the very nature of Frankie's main struggle: which is to find unity with other people. “The day before the wedding was not like any day that F. Jasmine had ever known” (MW, p.44). Frankie's sudden feeling of belonging to something affects her entire perspective.

A last difference about that morning was the way her world seemed layered in three different parts, all the twelve years of the old Frankie, the present day itself, and the future ahead when the J A three of them would be together in all the many distant places. (MW, p.61)

This is the state of F. Jasmine's mind as she is leaving the Blue Moon bar for the first time on Saturday afternoon. It is to be one of the most defining and life changing day in her life. The focus on an acute moment of development is a hallmark of a Bildungsroman. So here is F. Jasmine, on a kind of preliminary journey through the town, getting ready to make an even more important journey to Winter Hill to attend the wedding. She expects salvation through her brother Jarvis and his intended bride Janice, “the two prettiest people I ever saw” (MW, p.30). Her decision to improve herself before their wedding, and her resolve to go with them to “whatever place they will ever go” (MW, p.43) after the ceremony, lead Frankie to remake herself into a more acceptable woman. Apart from her name, Frankie's most obvious tomboy badges are her crew
cut and her typical costume of shorts, under vest, and cowboy hat. As F. Jasmine she wears a pink organdie dress, heavy lipstick, and Sweet Serenade perfume. She cannot alter her hairstyle immediately but she knows what women should look like; “I ought to have long bright yellow hair” (MW, p.18) Frankie thinks.

Frankie looks toward a perfect intuitive and wordless understanding in the three-person wedding she envisions that will unite her with her brother and his bride. So when Frankie realizes that she is a member at last, a member of the wedding, it serves as an important moment of realization and an indication of her future character development: “So these were the main reasons why F. Jasmine felt, in an un-worded way, that this was a morning different from all mornings she had ever known. And of all these facts and feelings the strongest of all was the need to be known for her true self and recognized” (MW, pp.61-62 Emphasis added). The above quote is also a kind of meta-analysis of the structure of the novella itself. F. Jasmine reflects that her life is divided into three parts: the past, the immediate present, and the future. This may seem self-evident, but it points to the huge importance of this isolated part of her life as a defining moment in her development. This moment is all about moving forward up and out all the way into adulthood. Frankie has been thinking about the fact that the couple is
together in Winter Hill, while she is separate from them, alone at home. But she finds comfort in the notion that she still belongs to them in some way: the physical separation seems trifling. But this turns out to be utterly delusional because events do not happen as she envisages. Frankie's plan to join the young couple on their honeymoon however is doomed to failure, as are all fantastic plans for escape in the five McCullers novels. Her dream is destined to fail, of course, as surely as the soft August moths are caught in their “irony of fate”, as Frankie refers to their plight, “when, attracted by the light, they press against the window screen and die” (MW, p.14). Frankie is totally unrealistic in her plans, thinking the move will end all her worries. She fails to realize she must work out her own future without the couple as a crutch. From beginning to end the wedding is a nightmare. The chance never comes for Frankie to announce her intentions, and when she is dragged screaming from the honeymoon car, her dream is crushed. Frankie's plan to join the wedding is a non-realistic way of solving her conflict, “a flight from reality.” She realizes that “all that came about [at the wedding] occurred in a world beyond her power” (MW, p.144).

After Frankie returns home she concludes that though the wedding has not provided an escape, she will still leave town:

Every day she wanted more and more to leave the town: to light out for South America or Hollywood or New York
City. But although she packed her suitcase many times, she could never decide to which of these places she ought to go, or how she would get there by herself. (MW, p.26)

The night that Frankie returns from the wedding, bitter and angry, she writes her father a farewell letter in which she explains that she can stand her existence no longer. She takes the pistol from her father's bureau drawer and heads for the train station with a vague idea of jumping on any freight car that happened to come along, but the station is closed and there are no trains expected until morning. When she runs away from home after the wedding, Frankie merely goes through the motions of protest and attempted escape. She knows before she reaches the street corner that her father has awakened and will soon be after her. Her plan of hopping a boxcar seems unreal even to her: "It is easy to talk about hopping a freight train, but how did bums and people really do it"? (MW, p.152) Her feeling of isolation is intense that evening as she slips out into the streets. After walking the "night-empty streets" (MW, p.152) until she ends up in the alley where the youth was found that spring with his throat slashed, she decides to wait for the train at the bar of the Blue Moon. The alleys are gloomy and she imagines the long dark car she sees to be that of a terrible gangster. Alone and frightened, she prays for company: "There was only knowing that she must find somebody, anybody that she could join with to go away." She admits to herself that
she is “too scared to go into the world alone” (MW, p.155). When Frankie tries to run away from home, she discovers that she does not have the necessary resources to leave by herself. The details of ‘hopping freight,’ for instance, lie outside the realm of her preparatory experience. She does not have to be prevented from hopping freights; her greatest restriction is that she does not know how or really want to. Barbara White has suggested “The Member of the Wedding is less a novel of initiation into acceptance of human limits than a novel of initiation into acceptance of female limits” (White, 1986, p.141). “Weddings are, traditionally, the destiny of girls and with marriage a girl officially becomes an adult” (White, 1986, p.104). But Frankie has changed her female destiny, for this wedding does not entail any of the restrictions that she has perceived in womanhood. Her proposed marriage is not to one man because in her society that implies submission; nor does Frankie attempt to acquire in her brother and sister-in-law a new set of parents, for then she would be a child again. Frankie’s dream involves being “neither a wife nor a child but an adult equal.”

In reality Frankie is already a member of something — she has “the terrible summer we of her and John Henry and Berenice; but that was the last we in the world she wanted” (MW, p.42), because a black woman and a child do not raise her status. Her brother Jarvis is a soldier, one of those envied beings who gets to see the world; his fiancée,
whom Frankie has met only briefly, at least has the distinction of being “small and pretty” (MW, p.29). According to Frankie's plan, the three JA's — will travel together. She will no longer be trapped in her kitchen but can climb glaciers in Alaska and ride camels in Africa. The elusive fantasies of her “wedding frame of mind,” (MW, p.74) momentarily ease for Frankie the fear and distress of the past months. They replace her earlier fantasy of perfect membership attainable through the sharing of her blood as a Red Cross donor. She had then imagined her individuality lost “in the veins of Australians and fighting French and Chinese as though she were close kin to all these people” (MW, p.24). In that fantasy she saw herself decorated for contributing her life's blood to “join the war,” while army officers sharply saluted and addressed her with respect as Adams, because her act of courage made her one of them. Frankie will now be able to fly planes and win medals, and all three JA's will be equally famous and successful. This fantasy makes Frankie feel a “lightness” in the place of that old constriction in her chest; it gives her a sense of “power and entitlement” — “Under the fresh blue early sky the feeling as she walked along was one of newly risen lightness, power, entitlement” (MW, p.55 emphasis added).

Frankie's desire to be a soldier or a pilot, or Mick's (Lonely Hunter) to be an inventor or a composer could be fulfilled only by a boy; these
goals are simply defined as unacceptable for girls. Nor is Frankie's ambition to travel and gain experience in the world unattainable for a boy. The comparison of Frankie with Holden Caulfield by James Johnson has relevance here. Holden's basic conflict resembles Frankie's — he does not want to remain a child but has reservations about the phoniness of adults (he projects these doubts into his dream of being catcher in the rye and catching children before they fall over the cliff into adulthood). But if Holden's "displacement" appears greater than Frankie's, it is merely a measure of his "greater freedom." He can at least venture into the world and test it by experience. Johnson includes Frankie and Holden as examples of modern adolescent characters that flee their homes and undertake journeys. Yet "Frankie's hour of running away hardly measures up to Holden's experience." The barriers to Frankie's entering the world are not entirely external. Frankie and Mick are "protected" (that is, banned) from experience and Mick especially is expected to preserve close ties with the family. But generally the girls fail to journey into the world because of their own passivity. Frankie and Mick wait for something to happen to them — they do not think in terms of making something happen. They dream but seldom act. Even Frankie's desire to be a member stresses identification with the world rather than participation in it. In Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden wants
adult privilege and male power, but he fears becoming a hypocrite, as he associates adulthood with phoniness. Frankie experiences the same conflict: she too has reservations about phoniness. But for Frankie this conflict is secondary — almost a luxury, one might conclude — because she cannot accept her gender role. All the female novelists of adolescence portray gender role conflict as fundamental in their heroine's growth to womanhood. In fact, hypocrisy is one of the traits they object to. However, they are too preoccupied in dealing with femininity to worry overmuch about the phoniness of adults. Both the girls in this study want to be adults but not women. When they discover that women are defined as inferior, they become resentful and afraid. They fiercely resist whatever they see as evidence of women's secondary position in society (for instance, sex and marriage). McCullers' Frankie speaks for all: 'I don't want to grow up if it's like that.' The adolescent heroines have something else in common: literary critics have not received them with the same warmth as Augie March or Holden Caulfield. While Holden has been viewed as typical, if not superior, Frankie Adams is "a monster and ... a misfit, maladjusted personality, and true freak." Clearly these heroines voice a protest that, unlike Augie's and Holden's, critics do not want to hear.
Frankie also resembles Holden (The Catcher) and Esperanza of (Mango Street), being troubled by sexuality. Throughout the novel Frankie skirts the periphery of sexual experience, and there are several acts of sexual initiation contained in the novel. Frankie refuses to believe those “nasty lies about married people” (MW, p.12) told by the girls in the club. She had a physical contact with a male and it caused her much mental anguish: “In the MacKean's garage, with Barney MacKean, they committed a queer sin, and how bad it was she did not know. The sin made a shriveling sickness in her stomach, and she dreaded the eyes of everyone” (MW, p.25). Her sexual experiences of the summer culminate in her jaunt through the town, when a drunken soldier tries to seduce her in a dark room over the Blue Moon Cafe. Were it not for her journey, she never would have begun to finally learn about sex. As a result, she grows and changes. She fights with her assailant and manages to knock him unconscious with a bottle. She flees the scene and for weeks is possessed by the fear that she has killed a man. After F. Jasmine hits the soldier over the head, she has something of an epiphany in which she connects the moment to all of the other encounters she has had with sex. She has a distinct feeling of uneasiness, which she connects to times in her kitchen, “when, after the first uncanny moments, she realized the reason for her uneasiness and knew that the ticking of the clock had stopped” (MW,
But she realizes that there is now no clock to shake and wind. The clock represents her sexuality, her biological clock, and her oncoming menstruation. We know that she has finally reached a certain development by the end of the novel because “the ringing of the bell” (MW, p.163) interrupts her. The bell becomes the announcement that she has progressed through time and has made it into sexual maturity.

Frankie like Holden does not undergo a complete sexual initiation through intercourse, as does Esperanza. Frankie's flight from sexuality is both mental and physical. Frankie's failure to gain insight into sexual experience shows that “initiation no longer entails knowledge and commitment” (Hassan, 1961, p. 321). Not all novels of adolescence include initiation; in fact, the protagonists may actively avoid or refuse it (Hassan, 1961, p.274). Hassan believes this to be characteristic of the novel of adolescence. In fact, there is no evidence in The Member of the Wedding that Frankie is homosexual (or heterosexual, bisexual, or asexual). In the play she adapted from the novel McCullers presents Frankie in the last scene swooning over Barney Mac Kean, the boy she previously hated. In the novel no clue is given as to what her sexual preference will eventually be. But Frankie does not fail to gain insight into heterosexual experience. Although she manages for a while to keep her separate glimpses of sex from falling together, near the end of the
novel she gets a sudden flash of understanding: "these separate recollections fell together in the darkness of her mind, as shafting searchlights meet in the night sky upon an aeroplane, so that in a flash there came in her an understanding" (MW, p.155). When Frankie suddenly puts together the sexual facts she previously refused to connect and thinks she might as well ask the soldier to marry her, we realize that she is giving up her rebellion and submitting to her female fate. At this point the jail image, part of the motif of constriction in the novel, recurs. A policeman discovers her at the Blue Moon — "her father having slicked the Law on her" (MW, p.159) — and asks where she "was headed." Frankie wishes the policeman who comes to fetch her would take her to jail, for "it was better to be in a jail where you could bang the walls than in a jail you could not see" (MW, p.157). Significantly, her moment of recognition comes after her plan to join the wedding has failed; it is associated with her consequent feelings of helplessness and resignation. Frankie now resigns herself — "the world seems too enormous and powerful for her to fight" (MW, p.18).

Frankie's attitude toward sex is not unusual; resistance to sex is almost universal in novels of female adolescence. The reason is always the same: adolescent heroines view sex as domination by a man. They may, like Mick Kelly, in The Lonely Hunter worry about losing their
virginity but they fear most strongly, as Mick does, losing their autonomy. McCullers treats an adolescent girl's association of sexual intercourse with male domination and loss of personal choice and power in an early short story entitled *Like That*. In his survey of novels of adolescence James Johnson puzzles over Frankie's encounter with the soldier, wondering why her experience lacks the "positive quality" of Stephen Dedalus' sexual initiation. Stephen's first sexual experience in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is the opposite of Frankie's. Stephen, hardly the "man's man (Gary Cooper) suddenly become[s] strong and fearless and sure of himself" 

Frankie, on the other hand, does not know "how to refuse" the soldier's invitation to his room; she thinks she is unable to leave, and when he grabs her, she feels "paralyzed" (MW, p.136). In similar circumstances Stephen receives a sudden influx of power, while Frankie feels loss of power. McCullers has Frankie express her conflicts in fantasies, as with her dream of a world where people could instantly change sexes. Frankie knows this dream is impossible. She finds society's condemnation of androgyny, reflected in her own world; after all, one of the freaks at the fair is the Half-Man - Half-Woman. Frankie thus projects all her desires and fears into a fantasy that she imagines might be more socially acceptable — she will join her brother and his fiancée and become a "member of the wedding." But
paradoxically, Frankie's plan to join the wedding is also a desperate attempt to preserve her identity. Her wedding fantasy is a symbolic way of resolving her conflict of wanting to be an adult but not wanting to be a woman, not wanting to grow up.

Frankie demands to be kept "safely in orbit," not hurtling "loose and alone" (MW, p.157) as the world whirls faster. Just as she can no longer count on time moving predictably, she can no longer count on the stars staying in their course. Though freedom tempts her, she resists it, because she fears unrestricted individuality. Such freedom would, like John Henry's refusal to follow the rules of the card games, preclude control, design, and pattern. These she perceives as existing only where people are assimilated in orderly units — clubs, armies, or even marriages. While she tells her friend Mary Littlejohn at the close of the book that she plans to be a great poet, she immediately qualifies it with her "safer ambition" — to be "the foremost authority on radar" (MW, p.159). Though bored with routine and highly imaginative, she wants less, at least at this point, to be a leader or an uncharted adventurer than to become one whose understanding of the laws of physics can keep planes and people from being "loose" in space. Frankie's insistence on assured patterns, on repetition, or on circling around a fixed center dominate much of the book's imagery with metaphors such as radar, motors,
musical rhythm, musical themes card-game rules, and military regimentation. Her most reassuring possession is the old motor in her bedroom. When she is agitated, she turns it on and finds comfort in hearing its rhythmic hum and watching the gears move synchronically. Playing cards are components in the theme of rules and regulations, because card games are governed by rules. In the first game, Frankie is exasperated with John Henry for not being able to follow the rules when he refuses to put a jack next to a queen. What Frankie is really upset about is sex, because she knows that John Henry understands the sexual connection between the jacks and the queens. As we later learn, he once removed the jacks from the deck, and then the queens as well, so they could keep the jacks company. This in turn ruined the game, literally because the deck was not complete, but figuratively because he took the sex out of the game. This indicates that sex is a fundamental quality of the game of life.

Music figures prominently throughout the story, and its use is symbolic of Frankie’s inner turmoil. Visiting John Henry one evening, she overhears someone playing blues on a horn. She is swept up in the music and is disturbed when the music suddenly stops. She tells John Henry that it will resume in a minute, but it never does. Frankie grows frantic if music lacks regular thematic pattern or stops short of a final
measure or note on the scale. Unfinished music disturbs Frankie deeply because it seems to confirm her sense that the world is unpredictable and that it does not always finish things on its own. It is not, of course, simply Frankie who is unfinished; it is her life as well that seems always on the verge of some sort of fulfillment. Equally, the unfinished music suggests the frustrating enigma of life in general, the way in which it keeps edging up on an answer, seems about to "lay a tune," but always stops short. On the day before the wedding as Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry sit and talk in the kitchen Frankie is distracted by the tuning of the piano in the next room. The tuner plays repeatedly the scale up until the seventh note, and then hesitates there, unable to finish. Frankie thinks it strange that:

If you start with A and go on up to G, there is a curious thing that seems to make the difference between G and A all the difference in the world. Twice as much difference as between any other two notes in the scale. Yet they are side by side there on the piano just as close together as the other notes. (MW, p.109)

The noise irritates them, but at the same time, it gives them a kind of existential enlightenment about life, whether they realize they have made this connection or not. The quote describes dissonance, the feeling or sense that something has not come to a resolution. In this case, the literal description is a musical one, such as the disconcerting feeling of hearing a musical scale that is incomplete, resting on the final note before finishing. It serves as a metaphor for the weekend described in the
novella. Because Frankie is in a period of dissonance, she feels ill at ease, confused and disconnected with the world. She has a desperate desire to move forward in her life, to find the adulthood that is just out of reach. So she has to find a way to take a step forward to find a kind of resolution that will bring her inner peace. Then, and only then, will she be released from the dividing line that traps her during the main events of the story. This remark touches on the dissonance that plagues her very existence. And what she desires is unity, or consonance. She marvels that only one step can divide her from that feeling.

The quote also brings to mind a similar concept used by Virginia Woolf in *To The Lighthouse*. In the novel, an aging professor named Mr. Ramsay is fixated by the metaphorical notion that he can never reach the letter *R* when going through the alphabet. The alphabet represents his intellectual progression and *R* represents the apex of knowledge that he can never attain. But it also serves as a representation for his own-self since his last name begins with *R* — which he can never really know. So he lives in a world of dissonance, dissatisfaction. Woolf describes Mr. Ramsay's intellect in similar terms as McCullers:

> It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, like the alphabet is arranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately, until it had reached, say the letter Q.\(^{69}\)
Woolf uses the novel to point out the fallacy of thinking about intellectual pursuits in a linear fashion. Like McCullers, she uses time shifts to break up the notion that we should always expect to walk through life in a straight, predictable line. Only by seeing life as something of a circle, can we escape the gnawing feeling of dissonance. It all comes together, considering that a musical scale is itself circular and linear at the same time. It is moving forward in a logical line, but always coming home every eight notes. In other instances, however, music has the ability to calm and reassure her. Describing the summertime interactions of Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry, McCullers writes in part two “Often in the dark, that August, they would all at once begin to sing a Christmas carol, or a song like the Slit belly Blues. Sometimes they knew in advance what they would sing, and they would agree on the tune among themselves. Or again, they would disagree and start off on three different songs at once, until at last the tunes began to merge and they sang a special music that the three of them made together” (MW, p.123). Here, music clearly represents order and comfort for Frankie because even when she and her closest companions disagree, music enables them to harmonize.

In a rapid denouement, McCullers describes the following three months. This is a time when “there were the changes” (MW, p.158) she
writes. In that time, Frances turns thirteen and when Frankie does find someone to love, it is not a teenage boy, but rather the artistic Mary Littlejohn who is two years older than Frances. Mary's Catholicism fascinates Frances:

The Little Johns were Catholics, and even on this point Bernice was all of a sudden narrow minded, saying that Roman Catholics worshiped Graven Images and wanted the Pope to rule the world. But for Frances this difference was a final touch of strangeness, silent terror that completed the wonder of her love. (MW, p.160)

The fear of Catholicism and the Catholic ritual was, of course, the basis of a number of the earliest Gothic romances. Frankie clings to Mary because she does not think she will ever be loved by, or be able to love, a man. Frances tells Berenice as they prepare to leave the kitchen for good that she and Mary are planning “to travel around the world together” (MW, p.159). But, in the meantime, they attend the fair, which is in town, though they avoid the house of the freaks. The old familiar kitchen has been renovated, the house has been sold, and Frankie and her father are moving to a home in the suburbs that they will share with John Henry's parents. Frankie has not spoken once of her brother's wedding since that fateful day and devotes her time now to poetry, radar, school, and her new friend, Mary Littlejohn. They receive a letter saying that Jarvis is in Luxembourg. Frances imagines that she will pass by there when she tours the world. As she gazes out the window, awaiting the arrival of her
friend, Frankie notices that the “last pale colors” of the day appear “crushed and cold on the horizon. Dark, when it came, would come on quickly, as it does in wintertime,” (MW, p.163) interjects the narrator. “I am simply mad about” — but Frances leaves the sentence unfinished, for “with an instant shock of happiness, she hears the ringing of the bell” (MW, p.163). Desperate to escape the “caught condition” of which Bernice has spoken, Frankie allows the “shock of happiness” to divert her attention from that which she is “mad about.” However, given the deterministic theme that runs evenly through this and other works by McCullers, there is no reason to believe that Frances’ newfound contentment will be anything but short-lived.

“The changes” McCullers mentions could be any number of things: Frances’s newfound friendship, her lack of interest in the freak house, and her maturity. But most fundamentally, the word “change” probably suggests that she has finally had her first period and has entered her childbearing years. The bell that rings in the last sentence is like the clock that announces her biological clock has started to tick forward. McCullers uses vivid primary colors with subtle clues to describe both the physicality of the characters and the landscape around them. She constructs the action of the story within that “green and crazy summer” (MW, p.3). First of all; green is a metaphor for spring, or the freshness of
youth, or Frankie's youth. Green represents her dissatisfaction and her feelings of being stuck. She marvels at the pale green moths, which have the ability to go anywhere they like, yet continue to return to the same window every night. Secondly, in the end of the story, Frankie interprets a near-sexual experience with the Soldier as crazy. Youth and sex personify the time period. McCullers repeatedly describes the vivid colors in the landscape around Frankie. She repeatedly reminds us of eye color. But she almost never uses the color red. This seems to imply a certain fear of the color, and of menstruation. During her attempts to donate blood Frankie had imagined the doctors would say that she has “the reddest and the strongest blood” (MW, p.23). This points to the fact that she realizes that her blood carries with it a certain vital force. The color eventually becomes sexual when she announces to the redheaded soldier that red is her favorite color.

By the novel’s end she finally accepts her formal given name, Frances, and with it her legal and socially prescribed identity as a young woman. Lawrence Graver claims that Frankie has gained "new wisdom about the limits of human life" (1969, p.33). Both Frankie's mother and John Henry are dead, and Berenice moves on to marry for a fifth time in her never-ending search for fulfillment. Berenice's departure signals the total collapse of Frankie's family. Frankie will continue to be an overly
tall, self-conscious and unloved person in the years to follow. Alone at night Frankie is isolated and always will be. The trip around the world with Mary Littlejohn is merely another dream like that of the wedding. Her dream of becoming a member of the whole world remains a fantasy of her immature imagination.

The parable of the restless organ grinder and his monkey, forever wandering like minstrels throughout the book, are representative of humanity: “They resembled each other – they both had an anxious, questioning expression … They would look at each other with the same scared exasperation, their wrinkled faces very sad” (MW, p.66). This description, remarkable for its metaphysical fusion of horror and compassion, might serve as a symbol of McCullers’ art. And “this fusion represents an achievement equaled by few other contemporary American writers” (Clancy, 1951, p.243).

Berenice, too, is in the process of making changes. She has given “quit notice” (MW, p.158) to the Addams family and plans to marry again. Though Berenice still longs for another marriage to match her perfect union with Ludie Freeman, she, unlike Frankie, is not willing to relinquish her freedom and individuality. She argues forcefully in favor of attaining independence — even of becoming a cashier in the restaurant owned by her prospective husband, where she will feel important in high-
heeled shoes and tap her foot as she watches the customers: “If I was to marry T.T., I could get out of this kitchen and stand behind the cash register at the restaurant and pat my foot” (MW, p.93). Because she recognizes that blacks have been more constricted by society than whites and because middle-aged people are more enmeshed in routine and dull responsibility than the young, she maintains that being caught is even worse than being loose. Blacks, she contends, are eager to “widen and bust free” (MW, p.119). Nevertheless she like Frankie acknowledges the disadvantages of independence when she comments on the inevitable loneliness of the so-called free personality. Her wisdom, won from longer experience than Frankie's, has embraced the paradoxical reality that, if one can lose oneself in a good family or marital identification with another, one can fully discover and save oneself. She wistfully recalls, “When I was with Ludie, I didn't feel so caught” (MW, p.120). Ludie Freeman's surname is surely symbolic. In the antithesis of her memory of a perfect wedding and Frankie's anticipation of one, the reader recognizes the vulnerability of those who choose to give up individuality in order to exist only as members of a family. The longing for freedom will remain alive in such a sacrifice of personal freedom, but the strength to reach for it may be impaired. Bernice gained a spiritual unity through her marriage to Ludie, but she achieved it at the cost of her self-sufficiency. At his
death, part of her was torn away and buried with him. Similarly, after the wedding at Winter Hill, Frankie continues to bear the pain of separate existence, but she can look ahead to the attainment of the freedom and independence, which a part of her has continued to demand: “The wedding had not included her, but she would still go into the world” (MW, p.149).

In the presentation of Berenice, the focus often shifts from the psychological tragedy implicit in her widowhood to the configurations in American society — economic, racial, and family which further entraps her. We know that she is, as she says, “more caught” because she is a black middle-aged person, a woman, a widow, a divorcée, a victim of beatings, and a poor person. Honey, her half-brother, may often be in jail because of some personal deficiency; but he is also in trouble because racial intolerance, discrimination, and poverty drive blacks to crime. But Berenice is, in most of the book, a symbol of affirmation; and she fights for happiness rather than resigning herself to the life of a victim. She fights against being viewed as stereo typically old, vigorously refusing to let Frankie call her an old woman. When Frankie reminds her that she has been thirty-five for the last three years, Bernice angrily retorts, “I still can ministrate” (MW, p.84). She may, at first, appear to be a romanticized maternal figure, but she eagerly leaves her employer's house to meet her
friends “to eat supper at the New Metropolitan Tea Room and sashay together around the town” (MW, p.27). She asserts, “I got as much right as anybody to continue to have a good time so long as I can... I got many a long year ahead of me before I resign myself to a corner” (MW, p.84). Even in her despair over John Henry and Honey at the close of the book, she does not withdraw from making firm decisions. If she cannot find another Ludie, she settles for any measure of happiness she can find. She settles for a life with T. T. Williams, which promises a measure of congeniality and of independence. As Frankie and Berenice speculate in circular conversations about such abstractions as freedom versus determinism, isolation versus a desire for community, and living dangerously versus living cautiously, their views on individual identity reflect still another theme — a continuing confusion about the nature of time. Frankie wins neither of her conflicting goals — to become perfectly joined and to become independent. Frankie cannot go with Jarvis and Janice and be perfectly joined, nor can she become perfectly free by running away from home. She also settles for compromise with a new friend and a new school. Similarly, Berenice cannot find Ludie alive and become a member again of that perfect wedding, nor can she “bust free” (MW, p.119). But when Bernice and Frankie talk about the mysteries of individuality and the vastness of the universe, they become so intent on
sharing the other's insight that they feel in awe of each other when they recognize their closeness. Berenice is strongly moved, for example, when Frankie hesitantly divulges the momentary vision she had the day before the wedding: Jarvis and Janice were “in Winter Hill preparing for the wedding,” but Frankie saw them, “for a few seconds, walking beside her” (MW, p.75). Berenice is overwhelmed by Frankie's revelation; because she has herself at times had a glimpse of her dead first husband, Ludie, walking beside her. She had thought that she was the only human being in the world to have such a supernatural experience. If one central theme of the book is Frankie's need to achieve a sense of identity with others, this sharing of a supernatural experience marks the closest approach to the imaginative conjoining of Frankie and Berenice. It is followed, in fact, by a kind of communion ceremony. Frankie reaches over and takes one of Berenice's cigarettes. She allows her to do so and for the first time, Frankie sits smoking with an adult. They momentarily understand what it is to attain the “we of me” (MW, p.42). This key moment, put in contrast to the unbridled hope of her first beliefs about the “we of me,” allows Frankie to finally mature and become more adult-like, because, with her childhood fantasies of running away from her surroundings gone, she can become more realistic and rooted: two key elements to becoming an adult.
We can see Frankie at the novel's end as having achieved what some may consider a healthy balance between two extremes. But Frankie/F. Jasmine/Frances has gained and lost her individuality in the process towards this transition. No longer can she dream of being a pilot or a soldier, of hopping a freight, unacceptable goals for normal girls in the postwar period; she is now “just mad about Michelangelo” (MW, p.159), “looking forward to having a laundry room in their new house, cutting sandwiches into fancy shapes” (MW, p.159). As of now, Frankie has taken small steps on her way to becoming an independent woman. Her independence as a woman must break new ground, and she set forth to do this. This is part of her self-assertion. By having a rational and mature sense about her predicament, Frankie fulfills part of the characteristic that makes up the female Bildungsroman. This maturity strengthens Frankie’s self-identity and helps push her forward as an adult as she tries to make rational decisions on her own. She does not look to Berenice for advice; this is her battle. Armed with the support of the life lessons learned from others, perseverance and the “sense of empowerment”, Frankie achieves a certain level of maturity. Critics such as Patricia Hill Collins view this “sense of empowerment” as a “change in consciousness.” In her book *Black Feminist Thought*, Collins states that, “this changed consciousness would be a natural progression on the next
stage to maturity.”\textsuperscript{70} Frankie is fighting as an adolescent and as a woman to discover her self-identity; she is now in the process of being self-reliant in a patriarchal segregated society. With the help from other women, she will be able to achieve her goals. As Collins states, however, “this journey towards empowerment lies within the individual woman.” Frankie continues on her journey towards womanhood summoning all of her inner strength to understand her femininity. As Frankie begins to mature, her growing bond with Mary, her communication with other women, and her image of herself in society all come together at this point. As she emerges from the story, the encounter with her identity has resulted from the dialectics of the personal and the collective, and depends on “a dawning sense of solidarity with other members of [her] class and race.”\textsuperscript{71} Nancy Chodorow observes that as a result of different childhood experiences, women's and men's inner object worlds are different— “women define themselves and experience themselves more relationally, whereas men feel more autonomous.”\textsuperscript{72} In contrast to the young male hero who at the end of the Bildungsroman comes into a complete sense of integration and freedom, the female adolescent is carefully schooled to function in society, to surrender her freedom and her sense of individuality. At the end of \textit{The Member of the Wedding} Frankie seems certainly happy, having released the tension of not
belonging; but the final irony of the novel is that having gained her membership, Frankie has lost her self. McCullers does not hold Frankie accountable, any more than she does Mick, for this loss of self. Frankie has done exactly what has been expected of her, what she has been educated to do. This is the price women presumably pay in the pursuit of individualism, or in the pursuit of Virginia Woolf's dream of "a room of one's own" (1929). "If the book maintains its precision to the end, it can hardly present the characters achieving harmony, because their hopes are too contradictory to be reconciled." (McDowell, 1980, pp.94-95) The phrase "instant shock of happiness" (MW, p.163) represents the only kind of affirmation that matters: affirmation in the face of doubt, in the midst of pain, affirmation of life in the midst of living. While the closure of this text may represent a gesture toward resolution of conflict and aesthetic finality, its very abruptness and incompleteness undermine such an authorial intention. For just when the reader "expects the falling action to unravel and explain" the book ends. The closure is unresolved, baffling reader expectations for clarification and completion. Consequently, "the stories are deliberately anticlimactic and inconclusive" (Kertzer, p.16). McCullers' affirmation is that "a Creator has formed an incomplete humanity, one that can only trust that there is sense in creation. Some good, rather than total good, is the meaning available for man." This is
the affirmation that Frankie achieves at the end of the novel. McCullers offers no magic formula, nor are there easy answers or "happy ever after" endings in her works. Her characters do not save the world. The epiphany they experience is that the variety and complexity of humanity are what make life worthwhile. That, ultimately, love and life are richer if, instead of being blind to differences like color and gender, differences are accepted as inherent in our species.

The coda indicates that Frances’ certitudes collapse internally simply because such a pattern is too blunt to express or reveal the complexities of truth. McCullers is deliberately ambiguous about the end; though the door opens (both spiritual and physical) it opens to the world of mystery and ambiguity. Frances opens new doors in herself only by first going through a region of conflict. In the last analysis, Frances’ experience seems to tell her that the outer life is parallel to the inner life, for the further one goes into one's own rooms; the more one discovers that they are inhabited by all humanity. In fact what Big Mama predicted: “a trip with a departure and a return and later a sum of money, roads and trains” (MW, p.129) will eventually materialize. The inadequate ‘Being’ that is Frances’ original spirit will continue developing: “Things will happen” (MW, p.115).
The examination of women characters in this chapter reveals that the protagonists have some insights to offer as they take on adult responsibility for themselves and for the world around them. The evolution of women revealed in these fictions does go beyond the individual. Perhaps it is time that these role models become "human" and that the social definition comes more in line with "the way life happens by itself." That is what this chapter projects through the women characters. In these troubled times, if the next generation is to "succeed" both its women and men must take adult responsibility for the survival of human society. To become empowered through self-knowledge, even within conditions that severely limit one's ability to act, is essential. These two writers have provided us moments of epiphany, of vision, when we witness a quality that altogether transcends the gender polarities so destructive to human life. In so doing, they have made of the woman's novel a pathway to the authentic self and to our innermost being.

Despite the fact that these women authors come from different national backgrounds and histories, they share an interest in the way their female protagonists of American heritage tackle similar problems of racism, class conflict and patriarchy in an urban American context. Cisneros' and McCullers' texts give voice to centuries not only of silent bitterness and conflict but also of kindness and sustaining love. The
revisionist view of the world that the respective protagonists emerge with is a deep and, at times, a mystical affirmation of the transcendent value of self and existence accompanied by a clear sense of the sacredness of the social contract. Both these novels are every bit as strong, as literary, and as meaningful as the traditional male Bildungsroman. At the same time, they take different paths, preventing a single or stereotyped view of coming-of-age experience. Both characters dramatize the crisis of identity, which faces girls as they leave childhood and enter into an understanding of what the world expects them to become. Both celebrate the search for the real self and cultural responsibility in the face of different oppressions. Yet both texts show that women’s literature has come of age; they announce, “I am.” That announcement should not go unheard.
End Notes


41 Oliver Evans, New World Writing 1, April, 1952, p. 310.


45 Francis Downing, Commonweal May 24, 1946, p.148.


51 Barbara A. White, “Loss of Self in The Member of the Wedding,” Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction (Greenwood Press, 1985), pp.89-


65 *The Mortgaged Heart* p. 81.


70 José D Saldivar, “The Ideological and Utopian in Tomás Rivera's ... y no se lo tragó la tierra and Ron Arias' The Road to Tamazunchale” *Crítica* 1, No. 2. 1985, p. 103.


