Carson McCullers started *The Member of the Wedding* immediately after she finished her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. Her original plan was to write a short story, "The Bride of My Brother." She worked on this book for nearly five years before she was fully satisfied with it. The characters are drawn from her own childhood. During the five years McCullers struggled with the novel, she had to face many distractions. She stopped writing this book several months to write *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*. She faced exigencies of illness, bereavement, and divorce.

*The Member of the Wedding* was written during the years of war, echoes of which are notable in the background. The novel is free from the social tensions of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and the Freudian obsessions of *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. The novel takes place in a small southern town where the protagonist, Frankie Addams, lives with her father. The feeling of being excluded from something
joyous and exciting is central and all-pervading in the novel. This feeling of isolation can be traced back to an extremely early childhood experience of McCullers:

When I was a child of about four, I was walking with my nurse past a convent. For once, the convent doors were open. And I saw the children eating ice-cream cones, playing on iron swings, and I watched, fascinated. I wanted to go in, but my nurse said no, I was not Catholic. The next day, the gate was shut. But year by year, I thought of what was going on, of this wonderful party, where I was shut out. I wanted to climb the wall, but I was little. I beat on the wall once, and I knew all the time that there was a marvelous party going on, but I couldn't get in.¹

Frankie's attempt to "get in" and participate in the "marvelous party" is the subject of The Member of the Wedding. It has been pointed out

by many critics that to Carson McCullers adolescents are particularly successful representatives of the condition of loneliness, which "is the basis of most of my themes."\(^2\)

For in adolescence the sense of isolation is very strong; one is no longer a child nor yet an adult .... Adolescents do not belong anywhere, and thus constitute excellent symbols of spiritual loneliness.\(^3\)

The central characters in the novel are Frankie Addams, John Henry West, and Berenice Sadie Brown. Frankie is "twelve and five-sixths years old" (16). She makes her appearance dressed as a boy, though she also applies Sweet Serenade perfume. She is "an unjoined person who hung around in doorways" (1). In the first few pages of the novel we find that Frankie is afraid of the future and resists even the knowledge of sex, which she considers "nasty lies about married people" (11). "Like Mick Kelly

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2. The Mortgaged Heart, p. 274.
(in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter), Frankie is first of all animated by the desire to escape: escape boredom, escape her identity, escape the South itself. Her life, like the dream she relates to a fortune teller, is a door slowly opening on nowhere."\(^4\)

As pointed out earlier, Frankie is an "unjoined person"; "She belonged to no club and and was a member of nothing in the world" (1). Some of the older girls she played with last year have a neighbourhood club and there are parties with boys on Saturday nights. This summer she is in so much secret trouble that she thinks it better to stay at home and spend her time in the company of Berenice Sadie Brown and John Henry West. Frankie has developed a reluctance to remain a child, which is shown in her anger when her brother and his fiancee give him a doll. She uses phrases like "sick unto death" (14) and "irony of fate" (12) (141) in her conversation to prove that she has grown up. She even wants to change her name from Frankie to F. Jasmine. She chooses the name Jasmine also because the first

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\(^4\) Ihab Hassan, "Carson McCullers," p. 320.
two letters JA match the JA of Jarvis and Janice. From Frankie the tomboy with her crewcut and her typical costume of shorts, undervest, and cowboy hat, she becomes F. Jasmine the lady, wearing a pink organdie dress, heavy lipstick, and Sweet Serenade perfume. But she is excluded by the adult world. Thus she finds herself in the no-man's land between the worlds of child and adult.

Berenice is a middle aged black who keeps house for Frankie's father. In fact, she is the only mother Frankie has ever known, her own mother having died when she was born. The novelist presents Berenice is a completely man-oriented woman. For her to talk about her life means to talk about her four previous husbands and current beau. According to her the pride of a woman depends on the number of men she can attract. When Henry asks her how many men she caught, she replies, "Lamb, how many hairs is in these plaits? You talking to Berenice Sadie Brown" (79). She prefers the company of men to that of women: "I'm not the kind of person to go around with crowds of womens" (80). Fearful of aging, Berenice loves still to play with children, and she sees herself
most clearly as a young bride. She has chosen an artificial blue eye, and she perhaps attempts to achieve in this choice a linking of the worlds of the Negro and the white. She offers a blueprint for a better world:

First, there would be no separate colored people in the world, but all human beings would be light brown color with blue eyes and black hair... all human men and ladies and children as one loving family on earth .... No war, said Berenice. No stiff corpses hanging from the Europe trees and no jews murdered anywhere .... Also, no starving. To begin with, the real Lord God had made free air and free rain and free dirt for the benefit of all. There would be free food for every human mouth, free meals and two pounds of fat-back a week, and after that each able-bodied person would work for whatever else he wished to eat or own .... (91-92)

Berenice's is a stereotypically female world: everyone is part of the family and is peacefully provided with food. Yet, although her pacifism and nurturing
fit easily into social definitions and her rejection of the horrors of the war-torn world reflects the 40s, still Berenice is aware as a black woman that society can be destructively exclusive. This insight leads her to desire equality — of looks, of color, of race.

Another aspect that causes the sense of isolation in Frankie is her physical appearance. She has grown too tall to walk under the arbor in her yard whereas "Other twelve-year-old people could still walk around inside, give shows and have a good time" (6). The neighbourhood children with whom she used to play now appear to her as "Just a lot of ugly silly children. Running and hollering and running and hollering" (9). Her father confirms this change and tells her that she is too big to sleep in his bed any longer. He says, "Who is this great big long-legged twelve-year-old blunderbuss who still wants to sleep with her old Papa" (22). Like a typical adolescent, she feels that she is not wanted at home: "She began to have a grudge against her father and they looked at each other in a slant-eyed way. She did not like to stay at home" (22).
John Henry West is Frankie's cousin. He is six years old and her only other companion. Sometimes Frankie gets tired of him and sends him home. When John Henry joins Berenice in criticizing Frankie about her lack of cleanliness, "She made a terrible face at him and grabbed the frying pan that hung above the stove. She chased him three times around the table, then up through the front hall and out of the door. She locked the front door and called again: 'Go home'" (19). Sometimes she desperately needs his company and begs him to stay all night:

Already John Henry was asleep. She heard him breathe in the darkness, and now she had what she had wanted so many nights that summer; there was somebody sleeping in the bed with her. She lay in the dark and listened to him breathe, then after a while she raised herself on her elbow. He lay freckled and small in the moonlight, his chest white and naked, and one foot hanging from the edge of the bed. Carefully she put her hand on his stomach and moved closer, it felt as though a
little clock was ticking inside him and he smelled of sweat and Sweet Serenade. He smelled like a sour little rose. Frankie leaned down and licked him behind the ear. Then she breathed deeply, settled herself with her chin on his sharp damp shoulder, and closed her eyes: for now, with somebody sleeping in the dark with her, she was not so much afraid (13).

Like Mick Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, who could depend on her brother, Bubber, Frankie can count on John Henry for support or for a willingness to listen to her anger and grief. When she is blinded by tears of anger because some girls have spread a rumour that she smells bad, he tries to comfort her, and says, "I don't think you smell so bad ....you smell sweet" (10).

Frankie's "love-hate" relationship with John Henry shows us that she does not know what she really wants. On John Henry's side it can be said that he never becomes a full member of the trio who spend every afternoon in the hot kitchen. He remains only an observer, a listener, or a questioner. But
he does not want to be left out of the company. He insists on playing cards with them but does not follow the rules. He thinks it funny to be alternately a boy and girl, and his behaviour makes his age seem indeterminate. It has been pointed out by critics that in his ambiguous identity as ageless and sexless, he functions in the plot somewhat as Anancleto does in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* or Lymon in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. But his development is more rounded than theirs, and his emotional appeal as an engaging child makes him resemble Bubber in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. We can say that while Berenice represents the practical, down-to-earth adult, John Henry represents the dignified, unreachable child. Many times Frankie finds herself incapable of communicating with the young boy:

"There were times when John Henry would not answer anything you said to him" (39). When Frankie says, "You know it is still hard for me to realize that the world turns around at the rate of about a thousand miles an hour," he says with a confidence of a grown-up, "I know it" (13). In fact Frankie is surprised at the fact that she is not able to
understand John Henry when, for example, she tries to tell him about her experience with soldier in the hotel room:

But as she looked into those cold, child eyes she knew that she could not explain. John Henry would not understand, and his green eyes gave her a funny feeling. (131)

The reason for Frankie's failure to understand John Henry is that his world has its own laws and so is beyond communication. The surrealist quality of his "queer child drawings" reflects his world:

Those two eyes drawn in a sideview face gave her a funny feeling. But reason with John Henry, argue with him? You might as well argue with cement. Why did he do it? Why? Because it was a telephone man. What? Because he was climbing the pole. It was impossible to understand his point of view. And he did not understand her either. (131-32).

It is the eccentricity of John Henry's and the down-to-earth practicality of Berenice that make
Frankie feel more isolated and make her painfully aware that she is "a member of nothing in the world" (1).

On the last Friday in August something happens which makes life wonderful for Frankie once again. Her brother Jarvis, a soldier in Alaska, comes home with a girl called Janice Evans, a girl who lives at Winter Hill. They are to be married on Sunday, and Frankie and her father will be attending the Wedding. After Jarvis and Janice leave for Winter Hill, and Mr. Addams for his jewelry store, Frankie starts playing cards with Berenice and John Henry. Her mind is full of thoughts about her brother and his fiancee. She wants to become a member of the wedding and thus join the little community to be formed by the joining of her brother and his bride. She is confident that together they will go into the world: "she knew who she was and how she was going into the world.... At last she knew just who she was and understood where she was going" (42-43). This inspiration removes from her mind the sense of exclusion which had made her think that "the world seemed somehow
separate from herself" (21). She envisions a connection with the community of the world through her brother and his bride. She thinks,

They are the we of me. Yesterday, and all the twelve years of her life, she had only been Frankie. 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 Berenice 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, unless it would be the terrible summer we of her and John Henry and Berenice — and that was the last we in the world she wanted. Now all this was suddenly over with and changed. There was her brother and the bride, and it was as though when first she saw them something she had known inside of her: They are the we of me. (39-40)

She tells Berenice,
"We will just walk up to people and know them right away. We will be walking down a dark road and see a lighted house and knock on the door and strangers will rush to meet us and say: Come in! Come in!... We will belong to so many clubs that we can't even keep track of all of them. We will be members of the whole world. Boyoman! Manoboy!" (112).

Many critics point to the mystic quality in the bond Frankie feels:

She does not wish to be joined to a person but to that which joins all people - to the we of people. For this, a wedding is of course the right symbol.... Frankie is seeking nothing less than the common denominator of all humanity.\(^5\)

Frankie's reply to Berenice's charge that she is jealous of Janice, her brother's bride-to-be, substantiates this view: "I couldn't be jealous of one of them without being jealous of them both. I associate the two of them together" (15).

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But this most powerful of Frankie's fantasies is also crushed by reality. Frankie goes downtown to buy a new dress and shoes. On the way she tells everyone she meets about the wedding. That is how she happens to enter the Blue Moon, a café where she knows children are not allowed. But as she considers herself F. Jasmine Addams, no longer a child, she goes in to tell the Portuguese proprietor about the wedding. The only other person in the café is a red-headed soldier from a nearby army post, whom she meets again on the street. Throughout her conversation with the soldier she is troubled by an uneasy feeling that something is wrong; "There was an uneasy doubt that she could not quite place or name" (65).

When Frankie returns home, she learns that Berenice and John Henry will also attend the wedding. She comes to know that a relation of theirs has died. Berenice is dismayed when she sees the orange silk evening dress, the silver hair ribbon, and the silver slippers Frankie has bought to wear at the wedding. She tries, without much success, to alter the dress for the gawky young girl. Later they begin to talk
about the dead people they have known. Berenice tells them about Ludie Freeman, the first husband she truly loved. The story of Ludie and the three other husbands makes them all feel lonesome and sad. Berenice holds the two children on knees as she tries to explain to them the simple wisdom life has taught her. They begin to sing spirituals in the half-dark kitchen. Frankie is compelled to listen as Berenice finds flaws "in all of her ideas, and from the first word to the last" she does 'her terrible, level best to try and deny the wedding' (73). She also tells Frankie that her (Frankie's) plan to stay with her brother after the wedding is doomed to disappointment. She says, "Two is company and three is a crowd" (73). But Frankie says that she will shoot herself if her brother and Janice refuse to take her with them. In the evening, excited at the thought of having a date, she goes out to meet the soldier. He invites her to his room and she goes with him, but when he attempts familiarities, she hits him on the head with a pitcher and escapes. She climbs down the fire escape and runs all the way home. She is glad to get into bed with no one but John Henry by her side.
On the day of the wedding, Frankie accompanies her father, Berenice, and John Henry to Winter Hill, where things turn out even worse than Berenice predicted. Frankie is treated like a child by the bride's parents and other guests, and finds no opportunity to say what is in her heart:

She wanted to speak to her brother and the bride, to talk to them and tell them of her plans, the three of them alone together. But they were never once alone .... She wandered from one to the other of them, unable to explain ....

She stood in the corner of the bride's room, wanting to say: I love the two of you so much and you are the we of me. Please take me with you from the wedding, for we belong to be together. Or even if she could have said: May I trouble you to step into the next room, as I have something to reveal to you and Jarvis? And get the three of them in a room alone together and somehow manage to explain. If only she had written it down on the typewriter in advance, so that she could hand it to them and they would read!
But this she had not thought to do, and her tongue was heavy in her mouth and dumb. (137)

After the ceremony she plants herself with her suitcase in the couple's car and causes a scandle by refusing to move:

You are the we of me, her heart was saying, but she could only say aloud: "Take me!" And they pleaded and begged with her, but she was already in the car. At the last she clung to the steering wheel until her father and somebody else had hauled and dragged her from the car, and even then she could only cry in the dust of the empty road: "Take me! Take me!" But there was only the wedding company to hear, for the bride and her brother had driven away. (138)

During their return journey, Berenice and John Henry try to console Frankie but in vain. That night, when everyone is asleep, she leaves the house with her suitcase, planning to board a train. Before leaving, she writes a letter to her father: "I told you I was going to leave town because it is inevitable."
I cannot stand this existence any longer because my life has become a burden" (141). But as the train is only at two in the morning, she wanders disconsolately about the deserted streets, finally going into the Blue Moon Café. Frankie's sense of isolation is now greater than ever, for she doubts the very possibility of that connection with the world which she so eagerly wanted to establish:

The world was now so far away that Frances could no longer think of it.... Between herself and all the places there was a space like an enormous canyon she could not hope to bridge or cross. (148)

Meanwhile her father informs the police about her running away. A policeman finds her in the café and sends for her father.

By November, Frankie has almost forgotten the wedding. There have been many changes: John Henry has died of meningitis; Mary Littlejohn has become her best real friend; she and her father are moving to a house in the suburbs; Berenice is leaving to marry TT. And we find in Frankie, now thirteen, a
young lady who calls herself Frances. She is "just mad about Michelangelo" (150). Frankie wants to become either a great poet or else the foremost authority on radar.

Thus the novel centres around the emotional turmoil and confusion of an adolescent girl in the twilight period, when the anarchy of tomboy child has ceased but the somewhat more decorous life of girlhood has not yet begun.

The novel is divided into three parts, on the basis of the roles Frankie assumes. We see her first as Frankie Addams the tomboy, bored and restive. Her actual world is defined by the kitchen she shares with Berenice and John Henry. The changes begin when Frankie decides to become a member of the wedding. In the next section of the novel, we find Frankie as F. Jasmine with a new personality and full of pride and anticipation. Her encounter with a soldier, and her conversation with Berenice on the subject of the love show her mode of wilfulness which precedes disappointment. In the third part the girl, Frances now, outgrows the humiliation of her first defeat. Though there are number of similarities between
Mick Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and Frankie, unlike the former, Frankie moves beyond the feeling that the world has cheated her. As the identity of Frankie changes from part to part, so do the seasons, keeping richly in step, change from spring to fall.