

# Gender, Space, and Identity: A Feminist Reading of Mick Kelly in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a feminist interpretation of Mick Kelly in Carson McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, highlighting the interplay between gender, space, and identity. Through close textual analysis and drawing on feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Virginia Woolf. The paper argues that spatial constraints, economic instability, and ideological norms shape Mick's transformation from an androgynous childhood to a constrained femininity. This article explores how McCullers critiques the performative construction of femininity and the suppression of female individuality while retaining subtle narrative traces of resistance and potential renewal. Mick's ambiguous ending—neither fully liberated nor fully conquered—reveals the complex tension between social conformity and latent agency, suggesting that even within repressive structures, female subjects may still possess the possibility of self-recovery.

**Keywords:** Gender performativity; Spatial constraint; Female adolescence

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## 1. Introduction

Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* explores the intersections of gender, class, and identity in the American South. Mick Kelly, a teenage girl with an intense passion for music and dreams of personal freedom, emerges as one of the most complex and dynamic figures. As Mick transitions from childhood to adolescence, she experiences increasing pressure. She gradually changes to conform to traditional gender expectations, highlighting the intersection of gender and class in shaping female identity.

This essay examines how McCullers explores gender constraints and identity formation through Mick Kelly. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's argument in *The Second Sex* (1949) that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman <sup>[1]</sup>, I will explore how Mick's development reflects the social process of gendered socialization. I also use Virginia Woolf's concept of spatial independence from *A Room of One's Own* (1929) to analyze Mick's lack of personal space. This absence symbolizes the limits placed on women's intellectual

and creative pursuits. Furthermore, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity offers insight into Mick's shifting identity. She evolves from a tomboyish, androgynous child into a young woman who conforms to societal expectations. I will argue that Mick's journey involves both resistance and eventual submission to traditional gender roles. Mick's transformation is ultimately shaped by three interlocking forces: the spatial, the economic, and the ideological. First, spatial limitations restrict her freedom and creative potential. Second, economic hardship forces her into early adulthood and traditional female labour. Third, societal expectations gradually reshape her self-perception and aspirations. By tracing Mick's negotiation of space, sound, and material precarity, this analysis reveals how McCullers indicts the structural constraints imposed on women's bodies and foregrounds the fraught negotiations demanded of them. Yet subtle narrative traces resist a totalizing reading of her subjugation, preserving glimmers of her defiant subjectivity.

## **2. Mick Kelly's gender and identity formation**

### **2.1. Gender fluidity and resistance in childhood: Mick's androgyny and ambitions**

In the novel, Mick is portrayed as a tomboyish adolescent whose identity defies traditional gender norms. As a child, she exhibits traits that do not fit the traditional image of femininity: Her 'hoarse, childish voice and the khaki shorts she was accustomed to hitchhiking in, strutting like a cowboy in a picture show' <sup>[2]</sup>. She likes baggy clothes, cuts her hair short, and has been mistaken for a boy on some occasions. Moreover, her love of exploring, tree climbing, and always bruised knees show more 'masculine' interests (e.g., music, dreams of traveling). McCullers deliberately portrays Mick as a child who refuses to be categorised by her gender and explores the precariousness and performativity of gender from her viewpoint. Mick's refusal to conform to conventional femininity echoes Butler's notion that gender is performative <sup>[3]</sup>.

From the outset, Mick occupies an in-between space, both in terms of her physical environment and her social identity. She neither fully conforms to feminine expectations nor is entirely accepted into masculine domains, embodying the struggle of a tomboy in a rigidly gendered society. And she has always expressed a desire for her own space. This spatial freedom echoes Woolf's view <sup>[4]</sup>, which she saw as a prerequisite for women's intellectual freedom. While Mick could only share her room at home with her sister or brother, she had large areas of outside space as an independent space for her childhood. Whether it is an open space, a rooftop or a tree, it is her private mental world, which allows her to escape domestic expectations for a while. These spaces allow Mick to imagine identities beyond conventional femininity and hint at the possibilities of inner youthful rebellion. However, her 'boyishness' is not fully accepted and places her in an awkward position in society.

Music becomes Mick's principal means of resisting gender norms. She rejects the traditional Southern feminine ideals of purity and social propriety. The love of music and the pursuit of individuality reinforces Mick's disapproval and resistance to gender norms. The 'inner room' is the space in her mind that contains music, imagination and her freedom to think independently. The list of names she writes on the wall consists of white men indicating the fact that white and economically privileged men are the ones most socially advantaged. This contrast between the internal (free, artistic, dreaming) and the external (gendered, familial) presents the tension between Mick's personal identity and social constraints. It also creates her marginalised attributes and gendered androgyny <sup>[5]</sup>.

Importantly, Mick's neutrality and independence of thought have not always been consistent. As she transitioned into adolescence, the pressure of social constraints increased. She attempted to hide her rapidly

emerging femininity: 'Mick picked at the front of her shirts to keep the fabric from rubbing against the new, soft beginnings coming out of her breasts'<sup>[2]</sup>. She wishes she could remain a child rather than become a tangible woman. This would keep her out of the limelight of the male gaze. Yet the deteriorating family situation and puberty forced her to take on traditional female responsibilities. As Spivak points out in her feminist reading, Mick's body becomes a site of negotiation, caught between what she desires and what she is allowed to be as a woman<sup>[6]</sup>. Adopting the dress and domestic role signifies her descent into traditional gender expectations.

Although Mick's childhood resistance demonstrates the fluidity of gender identity, its eventual erosion foreshadows the power of patriarchal and economic forces. Her forced assimilation is not altered by her constant quest for the free space of independence. Freedom is fragile, she is disciplined by the realities of poverty, family life, labour, and loses her 'inner room'. This process is a loss of her character, artistic dreams and agency.

## **2.2. Spatial limitations and the loss of autonomy: temporary space and inner room**

Space functions not only as a setting but as a metaphor for freedom, identity, and the boundaries imposed on women in this story. Mick's gradual integration into the space of social life meant that she gradually lost her autonomy. As Woolf puts it, 'Women require literal and figurative space to think, to create, and to exist freely'<sup>[4]</sup>. Her growth illustrates the lack of this independent space for women at the time and how it greatly influenced their development<sup>[7]</sup>.

In the first chapter, Mick can be herself with a certain amount of space. She spends her time outdoors that do not belong to any gender or character. These unclaimed, temporarily liberated, threshold spaces allow Mick to escape the surveillance of her family and the stifling norms of society, and to unleash her imagination and musical dreams. When alone, her most important time, she accomplishes much and rejects traditional female subservience. Her presence in these undefined spaces represents her psychological openness and her refusal to accept the narrow roles assigned to her<sup>[8]</sup>. Her existence is divided into two separate spaces, where music is restricted to the inner room.

However, Mick's possession of this threshold space is fleeting. As she grows up, her access to these spaces becomes more limited because of the pressures in real life. Unlike her brothers, the boys retained the freedom to wander<sup>[5]</sup>. Mick represses her true self to meet family expectations in an exhausting social space. Woolf asserts that patriarchal society deprives women of the literal and intellectual space needed to make art<sup>[4]</sup>. Mick's passion for classical music remains unchanged, which was vibrant and central to her dreams and self-perception. Everywhere she looked, she sought opportunities to listen to music, to assemble instruments or to save up for a piano. But she knew that there was no place for her to hum out loud the Mozart tunes that hovered in her head<sup>[9]</sup>. Especially once she stepped into the socially normative space, everything about music and dreams disappeared from the narrative<sup>[7]</sup>.

Furthermore, Mick's home as a physical space symbolises the trap itself: overcrowded, noisy and emotionally stifling. Mick lacks space and is forced to compete with her siblings. While she carves out a temporary space of freedom in the family's boarding house, this autonomy is soon revoked—both physically and symbolically—by economic pressures and familial demands. As Santandreu and Catalina suggest, McCullers's adolescent girls often occupy a 'liminal position between the father's world and their internal voice,' trapped between patriarchal authority and emergent self<sup>[10]</sup>. McDowell's discussion of

Mick's developing identity helps explain her resistance to fixed gender expectations, a condition that can be understood as a liminal state rather than a stable gender identity<sup>[8]</sup>.

The loss of space for Mick's inner self is also a metaphor for the internal erosion of the self. She has a traditional patriarchal family in that the breadwinner of the family is his mother, and therefore Mick does not have admiration or respect for his father. This may be one of the reasons why Mick dares to pursue independence and freedom. However, female growth always seems to be accompanied by a loss of freedom<sup>[4]</sup>; Mick's emotional and intellectual possibilities are limited. By the end of the story, this inner room has almost disappeared. She no longer listens to music, writes, or dreams. She labours day in and day out, physically exhausted and emotionally drained. In this way, McCullers criticises not only the physical limitations society places on young women but also the ideological system that creates and maintains these limitations<sup>[6]</sup>. Her transformation can be seen not as a natural process of 'maturation' but as a forced coming of age<sup>[7]</sup>.

### **2.3. Economic pressure and the erosion of creative identity: Conformity and the seeds of renewal**

At the end of the story, Mick's adolescent gender fluidity and rebellion are increasingly replaced by expectations of conformity to traditional gender. As Thurschwell notes, McCullers's adolescent girls 'unjoin' the conventional coming-of-age expectations. Adolescent girls 'unjoin' the conventional coming-of-age arc, their growth marked not by progression but by contradiction and loss<sup>[11]</sup>. Mick's adulthood is not a culmination of identity but a surrender to imposed roles. We can see her helplessness as she is forced by social and economic pressures to give up her musical ambitions and accept feminine adult roles. She does not want to conform to the ideal image of the Southern woman, but society and its interwoven power structures prevent her from rebelling.

Mick is gradually shifting towards traditional female roles in her appearance. To throw a party, she wears a dress and high heels and spends a lot of time doing her hair. However, this choice brings with it embarrassment and hardship: she falls into a ditch in her high heels at the ball and is injured. The novel states, 'She felt like she was somebody else. Not herself at all'<sup>[2]</sup>. Her discomfort in feminine clothing highlights the performative nature of the role imposed upon her. Rich notes that Mick initially appears to be a nontraditional character but ultimately conforms to social roles to gain acceptance from her peers and family<sup>[12]</sup>.

This change is not a sign of growth, but a concession to the pressures of economics and gender roles. This is even more evident after she falls into a monotonous and repetitive, typically feminine labour. Mick's employment at Woolworth's represents more than a personal sacrifice; it marks the point at which economic necessity begins to reshape her identity. McCullers portrays poverty not simply as a social condition but as a structural force that produces alienation and limits individual agency under capitalist society. Mick's abandonment of music demonstrates how economic hardship systematically restricts women's access to creativity and self-realisation. Similarly, when Harry tells her that she 'would be seen to have had sex'<sup>[2]</sup>, she is shocked and upset. This does not grant her adulthood but rather reveals her inferior status as a woman in the culture<sup>[9]</sup>. Beauvoir asserts that 'one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'<sup>[1]</sup>. Mick becomes 'a woman' not by choice, but by force, through a combination of societal oppression and gendered culture. This spiritual division and repression make Mick realise that adulthood becomes a surrender to material necessity rather than representing maturity.

Martin observes that silence becomes symbolic of female adolescence in McCullers's work: 'The more

the girl matures, the less she speaks or is spoken to' <sup>[7]</sup>. Despite Mick's desire to maintain her individuality, her eventual decision to work rather than continue her education suggests an inherent sense of responsibility towards her family's expectations. Her decreasing verbal presence reflects her grasping internal dissonance and disempowerment. She is reluctant to speak to Brannon and pretends to be busy, focusing her energies on her work and thoughts about life. Despite her desire to maintain a sense of optimism and purpose, she eventually realises that staying in the inner room is no longer a source of comfort. This is the moment when she reluctantly steps into the monotony of adult life.

Yet McCullers's teenage characters are often situated in a 'weird temporal structure', where their growth is not linear, but fractured, regressive and potentially regenerative. and regressive and potentially regenerative <sup>[5]</sup>. Mick's narrative does not entirely exclude the possibility of agency. Singer's earlier role as her listener provides a silent acceptance, reflecting what Mick has lost, but also what might be restored <sup>[13]</sup>. Mick has been internally reflecting on herself but remains emotionally attached to the music, even if she can no longer actively participate in it. Thus, Mick's internal entanglement allows us to read her in a way that does not simply boil down to her utter submission to social repression.

Therefore, Mick's conformity should be understood as a response to structural constraints rather than the completion of her identity. It is a 'performance shaped by cultural pressure' <sup>[3]</sup>. Mick's ending may not seem in retrospect to be a complete loss of freedom, and she may still have a chance to break free of her role. Although Mick's future remains uncertain, her enduring attachment to music suggests that her creative identity has not been entirely extinguished.

### 3. Conclusion

Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* offers a powerful feminist critique of gender, space, and economic constraint through the character of Mick Kelly. This essay has argued that Mick's developmental arc—from a curious, androgynous girl to a constrained, feminized worker—is shaped not by choice, but by the interlocking systems of gender expectation and economic necessity. Drawing on feminist theorists like Beauvoir, Butler, and Spivak, and literary critics including Martin, Groba, and Sperling, we have seen how Mick's identity is constructed through performative acts and social pressures.

In childhood, Mick embodies potential: she occupies liminal spaces, wears tomboyish clothes and dreams of becoming a composer. Her disobedience is consistent with the 'adolescent girl's alter ego', in which identity is imaginative and fluid <sup>[10]</sup>. As she recognises this social expectation, her potential is gradually eroded as she matures. Mick is forced to labour and remain silent, unable to enter the inner room. Her outward expression of individuality, her words, and her dreams were lost as she entered society. McCullers constructs such women not to romanticise them but to explore how society holds them back <sup>[9]</sup>. I argue that Mick remains unfinished-shaped but not empowered by the adult world similarly.

Mick does not have a definite ending, and because of this, her open-ended fate leaves room for the reader's imagination and hope. Mick's transformation—framed not as an endpoint but as a temporary stasis—preserves the latent potential for her to reclaim the autonomy she once embodied. The self McCullers meticulously constructs persists in narrative ellipses: her silenced piano chords, her aborted diary entries, and her fragmented memories of Beethoven's symphonies all function as cryptic archives of resistance <sup>[5]</sup>. While her 'atypical female' identity has been eroded by gender norms during her formative years, her feelings for

music have not been completely severed, but rather transformed into an internal undercurrent waiting to be rekindled <sup>[5]</sup>. This untamed inner strength lodges within her as a dormant force, poised to rupture the shackles of gendered containment.

In conclusion, although *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* presents a growth path full of oppression and compromise, Mick's fate is not locked up. This hopeful leeway suggests that even under the double bondage of gender and class, the female self may still be reborn at some point, in some crevice. This possibility may still exist in the enduring quest for quiet rebellion.

## Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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