

The role of social constructs in mccullers' "member of the wedding"



In the novel *Member of the Wedding*, by Carson McCullers, the story of young Frankie Addams is told as she begins to navigate the world, documenting from her perspective, her exposure to harsh reality of the world as she begins to develop into a young woman. The time period from which the novel is from was characterized by division, including racial and gender discrimination, as well as strong marginalization on the basis of sexuality. Through the technique of characterization, McCullers highlights the effect of these social constructs in creating a divisive society which ultimately marginalized its people.

Through the characterization of John Henry, McCullers highlights the divisive nature of gender binaries and gender identity. John Henry is described “[wearing] a jonquil dress” (McCullers124). The use of the word jonquil, which is a perennial yellow flower, depicts the femininity of his character, as flowers are typically associated with feminine characteristics. Furthermore, his wearing of the dress reinforces the effeminate gender identity that is attributed to John Henry. There are clear character similarities with Lily Mae Jenkins, particularly in their choice of feminine clothing. Lily, a boy who had changed his gender after falling in love with a man named Juney Jones, is described “ prissing around with a pink satin blouse and one arm akimbo” (81). The pink satin blouse which Lily Mae wears depicts his delicate femininity and obvious defiance of social constructs during the time period, as it was not typical of a man to associate himself with feminine characteristics or cross gender constructs. In Lily Mae Jenkin’s instance, his character is ostracized, as is exemplified by Berenice’s comment in which she bluntly states, “ You don’t need to know Lily Mae Jenkins” (81) as if he

was unworthy of being known. Similarly, John Henry seems to be isolated. In his physical description, it is revealed that he “ had the largest knees Frankie had ever seen, and on one of them there was always a scab or bandage where he had fallen down and skinned himself” (McCullers 4). Through his flawed physicality, including the scabs and bruises typically associated with children, John Henry is attributed with a gawkish, childlike adolescence. It appears, through this description, that he possesses a lack of comfort in his own physical body and appearance, alluding to his qualities which have ultimately ostracized him from the rest of society. By contrast to the feminine qualities that are attributed to John Henry and Lily Mae Jenkins, Frankie takes on more masculine characteristics. She is described with “ brown crust on her elbows” (90). As it was considered a normality for girls to be clean and remain indoors during the time period, Frankie evidently crosses the gender constructs. Similar to John Henry, she feels as if she is ostracized, seeking refuge under the protection of her brother and her fiancée in order to compensate for the fact that she can’t find a place in her own life. This division is further exemplified within the House of Freaks. Inside, there was a “ Half-Man Half-Woman, a morphidite. This Freak is divided completely in half – the left side is a man and the right side a woman” (20). There is a clear marginalization on the basis of gender, as the division between the right and left side indicates a clear division caused by gender identity. Furthermore, the morphidite is ostracized from society as a result of his defiance of social constructs, which is evident through the fact that the person is referred to as a Freak, lacking any identity of his or her own.

Through the crafting of the character Berenice, McCullers illuminates the divisive effects of racial discrimination within the time period. In her brief physical description, she is described with having “ something wrong... Her left eye was bright blue glass [whereas]... her right eye was dark and sad” (5). The color blue of the glass eye is associated with stability. However, this stability simply an illusion, as exemplified by the fact that the glass eye is artificial and she merely wears it as a scar of the injuries inflicted by her prior husband. The juxtaposition of the color of her blue glass eye with the dark and sad right eye indicates a split in her physical appearance and metaphorically, her cultural identity. The artificial glass eye gives the illusion of stability and confidence, signifying her tolerance to the fact that she had been ostracized by a society which was dominantly white and discriminatory. However, beneath this façade, she appears to have a far deeper sorrow and passion for her cultural identity, stating that “ they done drawn completely extra bounds around all colored people. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself” (119). It is evident through this passage that Berenice is ostracized. Entrapped by the bounds which imprisoned the colored people, Berenice depicts a very clear division on the basis of cultural identity and race. The marginalization caused by racial discrimination is further exemplified by the description of the House of Freaks. Within the House of Freaks, the “ Wild Nigger knocked the rat’s head over his squatted knee and ripped off the fur and crunched and gobbled and flashed his greedy Wild Nigger eyes” (20). The man is characterized very scornfully, as indicated by the fact that he eats the head off of a rat and therefore embodies the qualities of a wild animal. These qualities are attributed to the population of black people, as the word nigger typically applied to all blacks during the

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time period. Furthermore, the racial marginalization during the time period is exemplified by the fact that the man is on display in the House of the Freaks merely on the basis of his racial identity, therefore implying that all African Americans embody these same qualities.

Lastly, through the relationship between the soldier and Frankie, McCullers highlights the effects of sexuality in contributing to Frankie's understanding of immorality and evil. Frankie's sexual development seems to root from her desire to be an adult. This is exemplified by the fact that she marvels at the idea of going on a "date, a grown word used by older girls" (74). However, when confronted by her first true sexual experience with the soldier, the room which she is lured to is described with "a glass pitcher full of water and a half-eaten package of cinnamon rolls covered in blue icing and fat flies" (135). The description of the cinnamon rolls, which are typically associated with warmth and sweetness, are representative of Frankie's naïve and innocent perception of sex, which seems to relate more to her yearning maturity and being accepted. Furthermore, the blue icing, a color which is often associated with maturity and stability, symbolizes her desire for maturity. However, this depiction of sweetness and warmth is juxtaposed alongside the rot and decay associated with flies. This symbolizes her realization of the true nature of sex, which seems to fall short of the ideas that she had conjured of maturity and therefore being accepted.

Furthermore, her harsh realization of the true nature of sex is exemplified by the description of the soldier inviting Frankie into his room, where he "grasps her skirt and, limpened by freight, [Frankie] was pulled down beside him on the bed... She felt his arms around her and smelled his sweaty shirt"

(136). His oppressive sexual dominance, as noted by the fact that she smells his sweat, which is typically associated with masculinity and strength, is further reinforced by the description of him wrapping his arms and constraining her beneath him. This contradicts the idyllic vision that Frankie had perceived, which depended upon the naïve belief that all people, including the soldier, had good moral intentions. However, the true intentions maintained by the soldier, as exemplified by his attempt to rape her, seems to be more of an immoral lust for power and dominance rooting from his human weakness and insecurities. This relationship provides an epiphany for Frankie, in which she is exposed to the harsh reality of immorality and evil, which seemed to contradict her disposition that all people hold values in line with her own.

“ We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don’t know why. But we caught anyhow” (119). This quote from Berenice Sadie Brown, a colored woman marginalized from the rest of society during the time period, depicts the reality that division is a fundamental piece of human nature. In the novel *Member of the Wedding*, Frankie is gradually exposed to the harsh reality of this truth through her numerous brushes with social constructs, changing her perception of the world drastically. Despite her naïve disposition that everybody is unified under the same values and her own feelings of being ostracized, she soon finds, through her different experiences and relationships, that no person is free from division, particularly with regards to the racial, gender, and sexual constructs that dominated society during the time period.

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