Self and Other: Mirror Figures in Carson McCullers’ *Reflections in a Golden Eye*

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In the 20th century American literary history, Carson McCullers (1917–1967) is distinguished as one of the most significant Southern female writers. In light of the allegoric description of the characters’ physical deformity and spiritual isolation, McCullers was labeled as a writer of Southern Gothic school (though she opposed to it). Precocious as she was, McCullers managed to infuse the tremendous impacts of post-war reconstruction and industrialization during the Southern Renaissance on Southern people’s lives and physic landscapes into concise, impressive and thought-provoking novels, short stories, essays, plays and poems, among which *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), *The Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951) and *The Clock Without Hands* (1961) stand out as her masterpieces.

Contrary to the great success of her debut, McCullers’ second novel *The Reflections in a Golden Eye*, due to the morbidity of perverse sexuality and love...
affairs, aroused an astounding scandal and was poignantly criticized when published. Moreover, in comparison with McCullers’ other works, this novel has not been substantially studied. Previous researches have mainly centered upon the grotesquery, which is regarded as symbolic in representing McCullers’ negative view of the world and humanity. Therefore, the subversive nature of her works in terms of gender issues is somehow neglected. This novel, though overlooked, typifies the revolutionary nature in terms of gender issues, thus it is worth studying and reevaluation.

This paper focuses on the mirror figures that serve as an Other to the subject to achieve an intersubjective recognition which is, as Butler sustains, “a process that is engaged when subject and Other understand themselves to be reflected in one another; but where this reflection does not result in a collapse of the one into the Other or a projection that annihilates the alterity of the Other”[2]. This de-centered self-other relationship not only challenges the traditional man/woman and the normal/queer hierarchies, but also shows the indispensability of the Other and exposes McCullers’ revolutionary and persistent engagement in establishing more democratic and tolerant gender relations.

I. Mirror Figures to Reflect the Self

Lacan describes the infant’s moment of recognition of itself in a mirror, which supplies the child with a unified image and thus relieves the child’s experience of fragmentation. Moreover, the mirror experience is “repeated indefinitely throughout one’s existence due to the imaginary relationships that are established with other human beings”[3]. In this sense, the mirror stage is not limited to a child and a mirror; rather, it can be understood metaphorically. The specular image can be provided at any time by a mirror figure with whom the subject identifies.

Due to the familial influence, Captain Penderton grows up with femininity and homosexual tendency, which is thereafter disguised by his fake masculinity and heterosexuality enforced by the gender norms in the South and in the army. As the mirror provides the infants with a gratifyingly coherent image of itself as unified, the mirror figure, by embodying what the other lacks, make the other misrecognize a unified self, which she/he endeavors to become. That is why Penderton used to have an unbridled fondness for Langdon, who represents his ideal male image.

Private Williams is such a mirror figure for Captain Penderton to transform and to identify with a masculine image. At the very beginning, the soldier is assigned to
clear some woods for parties, but his painstaking efforts to cut the sweeping limbs of the oak tree bring about the Captain's agitation since he ruins the screening effect of the tree. This offence reminds Penderton that the soldier used to inadvertently spill coffee on his brand-new and costly outfit. Owing to Penderton's contempt against all soldiers, Williams draws his attention as a transgressor of social rank. He indulges himself in imagining that he "catch[es] the soldier transgressing in some way"[4]. As commented, this initial scene "seems to be the key to the understanding of the whole book" since it foreshows Penderton's transgressive desire and "the novel's thematic concern about boundaries in identity formation"[5]. It is through the reflection of Williams' transgression that stimulates Penderton to cross the gender boundary.

The gaze at Private Williams' male body serves as a turning point for his transformation. During Penderton's adventurous ride of Firebird, the fluctuations of joy and apprehension facilitate the releases of his repressed feelings. In a fit of sobbing, the reflections of the past make him aware of his split self and his struggle these years. At that moment, he sees the Private, who is completely naked, leaning against an oak tree. "His slim body glistens in the late sun" and the Captain "[dwells] on the pure-cut lines of the young man's body"[6], which kindles his sensual impulses. The object or cause of desire, used by Lacan to demonstrate the connection between the subject and the other, refers to the objects as "the breast, the faces, the imaginary phallus, the urinary flow, the phoneme, the voice, the gaze and the nothing"[7]. The gaze at the glistening masculine body under the erect oak tree forms such a striking impression that provokes his desires. Thus with surprise, astonishment and rage, he feels "[a]ll the humiliations, the envies, and the fears of his life [find] vent in this great anger"[8]. After the dazzling gaze, he again stares at Williams at the stables when coming back from the ride. With his eyelids twitching, he is overcome by a feeling that "he and the young soldier [are] wrestling together naked, body to body"[9]. This fantasized bodily contact intensifies his motive for transgression and implies the later change.

Penderton used to have a penchant for Morris Langdon, but after the gaze, his love transfers incredibly to Williams. It is the virile "body" that "matters", which symbolizes an erect phallic body. But why does the body matter? According to Butler, the materiality of the body is "not a site or surface, but a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter"[10]. In other words, bodies, whose stylized acts produce
gender, are materialized in the service of a heterosexist norm. In this case, Langdon’s existence is a transcendental signifier of the norms of materialization, while the body of Williams represents the materiality of the male identity he is impelled to approximate. Hence, he “seeks to duplicate himself in another to confirm the presence of the penis”[11]. The body, like a mirror, reflects the ideal and unified self. With the gaze at the body, the Captain comes to own the phallus and identify with the image of the mirror figure.

Emotionally, Penderton’s hatred for the soldier turns into diseased obsession. Behaviorally, he starts to follow the soldier, misses his “dumb eyes” “the heavy sensual lips” “the childish pageboy bangs” and “slurring Southern voice”[12], frequents the stables to seek for more contacts and collects the candy wrappers left by the soldier. Apart from these actions, his identification with the soldier does not complete until he utters it in language—“Suddenly in the silent room three words had come unbidden to his tongue: ‘Private William Penderton.’ And these words [...] aroused in the Captain a perverse feeling of relief and satisfaction.”[13] By downgrading himself to “Private Weldon Penderton”, he finds his place as a subject which is structured in language. The pleasure indicates his sense of belonging that he has pursued for such a long time.

It is widely acknowledged by most historians of sexuality that “silence has structured homosexuality from ancient Greece to the present past”[14]. That he musters up his courage to speak out this unutterable and unintelligible love signals his intention to come out the “closet”, which is a metaphoric coinage by Sedgwick to refer to a situation in which gays, lesbians, or bisexuals acclaim their sexual orientation, first to themselves and then to others.[15] However, except his murmur of “Private Weldon Penderton”, words fail him when he wants to express his love for Williams, and it is not until the end of the story that he reveals his homoeroticism to both himself and others through language.

“You mean,” Captain Penderton said, “that any fulfillment obtained at the expense of normalcy is wrong, and should not be allowed to bring happiness. In short, it is better, because it is morally honorable, for the square peg to keep scraping about the round hole rather than to discover and use the unorthodox square that would fit it?”

“Why, you put it exactly right,” the Major said. “Don’t you agree with me?”

“No,” said the Captain, after a short pause. With gruesome vividness the Captain suddenly looked into his soul and saw himself.[16]
The square-peg-in-the-round-hole analogy alludes not only to Anacleto as the dialogue is centered upon but also to his own situation as a misfit. For the past years he has made enormous efforts to belong and appear normal. However, at this epiphanistic moment, eventually he voices out to verify the futility and impertinency of the struggle to fit in, and to forsake the heterosexual norms he once conformed to. It is through this affirmation that Penderton finally comes out of the closet.

Apart from the otherization of women exemplified by the tragic Alison and of the non-heterosexuals evidenced by Williams, Captain Penderton, used to be feminine and homosexual disguised in masculinity and heterosexual masks, now comes to identify with his true self with the reflection of the Other acted by Williams.

II. Mirror Figures as a Guide to Gender Development

McCullers regards the general self-other relations as mirrors, which facilitates the metamorphic gender identifications and reflects the vulnerability of the patriarchic and heterosexual power. In addition to Penderton’s case, as for the characters that lack a mother in this novel and thus suffer a delay in their initiation, the mother images mirrored by the female characters serve as the catalysts for their development.

Anacleto, resembling the Bakhtinian fool of carnival, “makes strange the world of conventionality”[17] and consciously or unconsciously overturns the present order, standing out as the most impressive and dynamic character in this novel.

One of Anacleto’s remarkable features is his change from a man to a woman. Transgender refers to those persons “who cross-identify or who live as another gender, but who may or may not have undergone hormonal treatments or sex reassignment operation”[18]. This transgender identity is facilitated by a mother figure, Alison.

Alison rescued Anacleto seven years ago in the Philippines when he first came to her household. He was tormented by other houseboys and even a glance at him would make him burst out into tears. He was seventeen years old at that time, but his sickly, clever, frightened face had the innocent expression of a child of ten. This severe regression, as Freud defines, is a means of defense mechanism adopted by adults who experience a ghastly trauma. They may even curl up into a foetal position, or revert to an earlier behavior or developmental stage that feels safe or comforting.[19] With the passage of time, Anacleto remains a child and regresses
frequently to the mirror stage. He cannot help looking at himself in the full-length mirror whenever he passes it. He “stop[s] and look[s] at himself, point[s] his toe, and cock[s] his head”[20]. This narcissism, or indistinction between self and other, mires him in the imaginary order in which he unites with his mother played by the protecting and benevolent Alison.

Anacleto’s integrity with Alison fortifies his femininity. Under the influence of Alison, he picks up French and shows intense interest in and ingenious aptitude for art. In the end, his creamy white complexion, foiled by girlish clothing and his graceful comportments, features him with feminine characteristics only to be disgusted by Morris Langdon. Despite his effeminacy, Anacleto is somewhat bewildered by his gender identity. He is fascinated by a little crystal cigarette lighter which is made by Alison from an old-fashioned vinaigrette. The cigarette lighter, as an emblem of masculinity and male identity, discloses his confusion about his gender identity.

However, the decisive factor to establish Anacleto’s explicit transgender identity is his becoming the substitute for Alison’s dead daughter. Their emotional affinity is strengthened through Alison’s child’s birth and death. Anacleto accompanies Alison when she is delivering and he shares the memory for the dead daughter. The stupendous wrench caused by the loss of her child has driven Alison to the verge of lunacy, however, Anacleto becomes her only comfort and last shred of security. She takes him as her child. Since the daughter is supposed to grow up with a sense of continuity with the mother[21], Anacleto’s unity with Alison naturally turns him into the replacement. He becomes the daughter. It is this border crossing that completely frustrates Langdon’s scheme to make a man out of him with the threat of military service. Lacan contends that the father intrudes into the mother-child relation, separates the child from the imaginary fullness of the maternal body, and leads the child into a world structured by symbolic language[22]. Turning into a daughter not only forecloses the possibility for Langdon to break the steadfast connection between Anacleto and Alison, but also exhibits the inner vulnerability of the hegemonic paternal system.

As Alison finds Anacleto’s pictures “at once primitive and over-sophisticated”[23], it is the same case with Anacleto’s thoughts. Once while he is painting, his conversation with Alison casts shrew insights into humanity and reveals the truth about human relations.
“A peacock of a sort of ghastly green. With one immense golden eye. And in it these reflections of something tiny and —”

[...]

“Grotesque,” she finished for him.\[24\]

The title of the novel *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, derived from this conversation, is an impressive metaphor with multiple meanings.

First, the eye is a ubiquitous symbolic image in the novel to serve as a catalyst for sexual stimulation and excitement. Both Private Williams and Captain Penderton are engaged in scopophilia. The soldier gazes at Leonora every night and obtains voluptuous sensation. The Captain constantly watches Williams and feels “his eyes, beneath his twitching eyelids, [are] like blue burning flames”\[23\]. The eye becomes “an erotogenic zone” and “the site of ‘burning’ orgasmic pleasure”\[26\]. It is the eye that makes the prohibited and invisible perverse sexualities visible. Moreover, regardless of her pessimistic attitude towards this reflection, McDowell is true in commenting “[t]he golden eye reflects the world of the characters as fragmentary” and “oppressive”\[27\]. With this exposition, McCullers’ concern for the sexually marginalized is revealed.

Second, the reflection serves as a self-discovery, which is crucial in the salient changes that occur from the middle of the story. For example, Penderton’s perilous ride of Firebird is both significant as a prelude to his encounter with Williams but also as a preliminary preparation for his transformation. In his delirious vision, he sees “[t]he world [is] a kaleidoscope” and he “[feels] the marvel of his own tense body, his labouring heart, and the miracle of blood, muscle, nerves, and bone”\[28\]. This self-discovery and recognition of his body precondition his metamorphoric identification with Williams. Some other characters also have such a reflection or self-discovery so that the reconstruction is made possible.

Last but not least, the metaphor is a true generalization of human life. As Lacan holds, “[a]ll sorts of things in the world behave like mirrors”\[29\]. The golden eye, as a mirror image, reflects the self-other relationships, which is the essence of human rapport. By mirroring each other, a relational context is established. It is by dispelling the others that a hierarchy is imposed on the relations, which makes the relations “grotesque”. However, apart from the otherization of women by men and non-heterosexuals by the normative, it also reflects the transformation of identity and sexuality exemplified by Penderton, Williams and Anacleto. The kaleidoscopic fluid and dynamic reflection, though “tiny and grotesque”, goes beyond the stagnant
and reflective closure and "implies a deviant sexuality and the creation of new selves"[30].

**Conclusion**

By revealing the discursive power of hegemonic patriarchy and heterosexuality with persistence, McCullers is engaged in the reestablishment of more democratic, dynamic and tolerant gender relations. The title is, as a matter of fact, a metaphor for the reflecting relationship between the Self and the Other. It is the masculine and the heterosexual that are deemed as normal, powerful and authoritative while their oppositions, the feminine and the non-heterosexual, are oppressed, abjected, and marginalized. The power relations of the two couples in this novel are obvious revelations of the hierarchies of the dualisms, which call for deconstruction and reconceptualization. Moreover, as analyzed, Penderton’s homosexuality and Anacleto’s transgender appear overt only through the mirroring of the presence of the Other, allowing more possibilities of gender relations besides the domineering pattern of men over women and implying gender complementarity and indispensability of the Other. Through the interweaving of her life experiences with her artistic creation, McCullers definitely foregrounds the lives of the marginalized non-heterosexuals and demonstrates her attempt at subverting the established gender norms and decentering such hierarchies as man/woman and normal/queer.

**Notes:**

[1] In her essay "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature", McCullers rejects the indiscriminate overuse of the term "Southern Gothic", which she, to some extent, exemplifies in her works. This essay is in *The Mortgaged Heart*, published by Penguin Group in 1975, pp. 258-264.

[2][18] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*. New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 131-2, 6.

[3] Lorenzo Chiesa, *Subjectivity and Otherness: A Philosophical Reading of Lacan*. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007, p. 16.

[4][6][8][9][12][13][16][20][23][24][25][28] Carson McCullers, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2000, p. 10, pp. 72-3, p. 73, p. 79, p. 96, p. 110, p. 114, p. 42, p. 85, p. 76, p. 70.

[5] Lin Bin, "Spiritual Isolation and Sexual Transgression: A Post-Feminist Study of Gothic Motifs in Carson McCullers’s Novels of the 1940s". Diss. (Beijing University, 2004). Tianjin: Tianjin People’s Publishers, 2006, p. 128.

[7] Ellie Ragland, "The Relation between the Voice and the Gaze", Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink and Maire Jannus, eds., *Reading Seminar I and II: Lacan’s Return to Freud*. Albany: State University of New York, 1996, p. 188.

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[10][29] Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”*. New York: Routledge, 1993, p. 9, p. 57.

[11][14][17][26][30] Sarah Gleeson-White, *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2003, p. 49, p. 39, p. 89, p. 55, p. 57.

[15] Tina S. Mirade, Andrew W. Miracle and Roy F. Baumeister, *Human Sexuality: Meeting Your Basic Needs*. Upper Saddle River: Pearson Education, Inc., 2003, p. 341.

[19] Ruth Snowden, *Freud*. London: Hodder Education, 2006, p. 113.

[21] Nancy Chodorow, *Feminism and Psychoanalytic Theory*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989, p. 184.

[22] Anthony Elliott, *Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction*. New York: Palgrave, 2002, p. 105.

[27] Margaret B. McDowell, *Carson McCullers*. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980, p. 64.

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