

# Reflected Selves: The Heterotopia of Mirror in Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

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**Abstract**—The mirror constitutes a significant image that recurs multiple times in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and it is mainly associated with Mick Kelly and Biff Brannon, who are reckoned in the novel grotesques in terms of sexuality. This article does not consider the mirror as something merely reflecting the subject in front of it, but as a media that occasions self-examination and self-reconstitution of the subject. It superimposes Michel Foucault's concept of heterotopias onto McCullers's depiction of the two characters' construction and reconstruction of subjectivity as well as their search for identification. Nonetheless, the so-called identification with the mirror image, paralleled by what Lacan observes in the mirror stage, is but a misidentification, for the mirror is in essence a heterotopia of illusion.

**Index Terms**—subjectivity, Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, heterotopia, the mirror stage

## I. INTRODUCTION

*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), the debut novel of American Southern writer Carson McCullers, was a sensational success in American literature and remains fascinating still to this day, probably due to its thorough exploration of “spiritual isolation”<sup>1</sup> and humans' experience of loneliness and resistance against it. In response to the nature of loneliness, McCullers (1971, 2005) incisively points out in “Loneliness ... an American Malady” that “no motive among the complex ricochets of our desires and rejections seems stronger or more enduring than the will of the individual to claim his identity and belong” (p. 259). *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, to some extent, echoes the theme in a unique fashion that calls for attention and interpretation.

In this novel, the mirror becomes an image of magnitude, as the word “mirror” occurs thirteen times or so, not to mention other variants of mirror, e.g. eyes, photographs and counter glass. In addition to the physical mirror itself, a person can also function as the mirror. According to some commentators, the protagonist John Singer, for example, is the mirror of other characters, and his best friend Antonapoulos in turn constitutes the mirror of Singer (Lenviel, 2013; Gleeson-White, 2003, p. 56). This article, however, focuses on the characters directly bound up with the mirror, i.e. Biff Brannon and Mick Kelly. Why does McCullers frequently write about the act of looking in the mirror and why does she choose these two characters to behave in that way repeatedly? In fact, looking in the mirror is related to the formation of the self, as evidenced by the situation happening in the mirror stage where Jacques Lacan believes that the infant between the age of 6 and 18 months commences to distinguish itself from the Other and perceives that the image in the mirror is just itself. Though Biff and Mick are obviously not infants, the mirror stage is deemed a widely used metaphor, which indicates that they seek to realize identification, or construct new selves by means of looking in the mirror in a similar manner. Both Biff and Mick are Southern grotesques who are marginalized and in a state of spiritual isolation, thus lacking a sense of belonging. Besides their connection with the mirror, the reason why I compare Biff and Mick is that they are different from other grotesques on account of their deviant sexuality. I would argue, nonetheless, the deviation contains hope, since they blur the clearly demarcated masculinity and femininity, challenging the conventional dichotomy of sex.

The image of mirror in McCullers's works has captured the attention of some critics. In the interpretation of *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, Fowler (2002) employs Lacan's theories of the imaginary and the symbolic in an attempt to analyze the relationship between Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon which resembles the one that the infant experiences in the early phase of the mirror stage. Zhou (2014) examines the mirror figures in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* the title of which is in essence “a metaphor for the reflecting relationship between the Self and the Other” (p. 85). Gleeson-White (2003) argues that McCullers's mirror “comes closer to the speculum, Luce Irigaray's curved, anamorphic mirror, which implies an excessive, deviant sexuality and the creation of new selves” (p. 57). Tian (2015), in the analysis of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, considers the mirror as the liminal space between the real and the imaginary, investigating the terror of Biff incurred by his liminality. Moreover, Lenviel (2013) contends that Singer is the mirror of other characters, “permitting them to view, and thus define, themselves” (p. 115). In the previous studies,

<sup>1</sup> In “The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing,” McCullers (1971/2005) notes that “Spiritual isolation is the basis of my themes” (p. 274).

French philosopher Michel Foucault's conceptualization of heterotopias has been rarely employed to explicate the novel, and the functions and limitations of the heterotopia of mirror are overlooked to some extent.<sup>2</sup>

This article aims to tease out the process where Biff and Mick construct "reflected selves"—their formation and transformation of subjectivity is associated with the reflection in the mirror—of their own by means of the heterotopia of mirror. The analysis of Biff and Mick will be conducted in unison, for they have certain resemblance intrinsic to their characterization. Furthermore, human beings in this article are reckoned as heterotopias as well, as the characters are imbued with heterogeneity and Mick in particular constitutes Biff's heterotopia of mirror. Nevertheless, we have to concede that the so-called subjectivity is problematic in its nature, and the heterotopia turns out to be illusory at length. These points mentioned have not been adequately discussed, and thus this article seeks to answer the following questions: In what way is the mirror considered a heterotopia and what are the functions of it? How do the characters materialize identification and self-transformation with the help of the mirror? Why is the heterotopia of mirror said to be illusory?

## II. THE GAZE OF MIRROR AND SELF-EXAMINATION

The scene of looking in the mirror is quite common in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and it is noteworthy that this behavior, mainly done by Biff and Mick, is seen across the whole book from the very beginning to its last page. Concerning Biff, he looks in the mirror three times in total, and the act is not only concerned about fixing hair or face, but accompanied by the potential for self-transformation. Therefore, looking in the mirror is endowed with diverse implications, revealing the dynamic process of the self. In the novel, Biff, the proprietor of the New York Café where many grotesques in town encounter each other, likes the so-called grotesques, as "He had a special friendly feeling for sick people and cripples" (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 20). The special feeling makes him become an observer in the Southern town, who composedly and wisely observes "abnormal" people in the café. The reason why he has an affinity for those freaks is due to the fact that he perceives that he belongs to one of them; his grotesqueness, however, is not known by others, but witnessed only by the mirror. In others' eyes, Biff is philanthropic and sympathetic, but he cannot well manage the relationship with his wife, and more grotesquely, beneath his masculine appearance lies some hint of femininity.

Biff looks in the mirror for the first time at the beginning of the novel. After quarreling with his wife, he goes into the bathroom, stands in front of the mirror and begins to think about the relationship between him and his wife: "Being around that woman always made him different from his real self. It made him tough and small and common as she was" (McCullers, 1940, 2018, pp. 13-14). Though Biff does not articulate his real self by looking in the mirror, at least it is shown that he discovers that the present self is not the real self. The look is obviously a self-examination, and thus the mirror functions as what Foucault terms heterotopia.

In "Of Other Spaces," Foucault (1986) argues that there are places "which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (p. 24). Foucault then uses a well-known concept utopia to explicate his idea of heterotopia; the most salient difference between them lies in the fact that heterotopias truly exist in reality, while utopias are imaginary. Besides, heterotopias, brimming over with heterogeneous elements, are the space of contestation and related with other real places, since heterotopias reflect real places while differing from them. Foucault further points out that the mirror is both a utopia and a heterotopia. The reason why it is a utopia is that the space inside the mirror is an unreal reflection of reality, or in Foucault's words, "it is a placeless place" (p. 24). By contrast, the mirror is a heterotopia, as it does exist in the real world.

It makes this place that I occupy at the moment when I look at myself in the glass at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

While subjects are looking at the mirror, their own reflections are looking back at themselves, and thus their eyes eventually rest on themselves. Reflection as the image in the mirror is, it is by no means exactly the same as the Self, and thus it becomes the Other. Between the real and the imaginary, the mirror constitutes a heterotopia, the most prominent effect of which is that it enables subjects in front of the mirror to start looking at themselves in the eyes of the Other.

Likewise, Mick looks in the mirror three times in general, and every time she does so, it anticipates the changes of her psyche which exert influence back on herself and in turn construct a dynamic subjectivity. It is in chapter three of part one that Mick looks in the mirror for the first time. She tries to figure out what her sisters are chatting, but one sister Etta responds nonchalantly: "It's none of your nosy business" (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 38). Mick counters, "It's my room just as much as it is either one of yours. I have as good a right in here as you do," and then strokes back her bangs, "quivered her nose and made faces at herself in the mirror" (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 38). Making faces

<sup>2</sup> Though a handful of critics mentions Foucault's heterotopias in their interpretation of McCullers's novels, none of them address the concerns on which this article focuses. Lin (2019) refers to heterotopias in the analysis of the café in McCullers's novels in her paper "'Cultural Enclave' in Southern Towns: Probing into Café Space in Carson McCullers's Fiction"; Tian (2015) just briefly cites Foucault's description of heterotopias in order to examine the mirror as the liminal space (pp. 104-105). See also "Radical Intimacy Under Jim Crow 'Fascism': The Queer Visions of Angelo Herndon and Carson McCullers" (Steeby, 2014).

indicates that Mick cannot identify with her sisters who epitomize the Southern belle or lady, and by doing so, she conveys her contempt and protest. Intriguingly, McCullers also depicts the scene where Etta looks in the mirror. Compared with the tomboy, Etta dreams to become a movie star and cares much about her appearance, doing chin exercises a lot so as to have a perfect jawline. “She was always looking at her side profile in the mirror and trying to keep her mouth set in a certain way. But it didn’t do any good” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 38). Etta represents an ideal image and pursuit of women, corresponding to those stereotypes. McCullers, by comparing Mick with Etta when they look in the mirror, mocks the ideal womanhood and deprives it of its charm. Therefore, through mirror, Mick has examined herself, who cannot identify with the Southern lady, but with her tomboyish self in this period of time.

### III. THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF MIRROR AND SELF-RECONSTITUTION

The mirror image and the subject in front of it are in a relationship of reflecting and being reflected. The image does not equate to the subject because it is obvious that the image is not a duplicate of the subject, but always reverses the subject. This is also in line with Foucault’s description of heterotopias, as the mirror not only represents the logic of regular spaces where men and women should behave in compliance with their respective gender roles, for example, wearing clothes that suit their typical qualities, but also contests and inverts it, as Biff wears perfume and Mick wears boys’ clothing, which challenges the general order of sex. It is the function of reverse intrinsic to the mirror that makes the subject have the potential for self-transformation which is not completed once and for all, but indicates a dynamic subjectivity, as evidenced by the scenes where Biff and Mick look the mirror again with the advancement of the plot.

If Biff merely realizes that his present self is not his real self when he looks in the mirror for the first time, he commences to sketch a clear self-image when he looks in the mirror for the second time. Beneath Biff’s mask of masculinity is his femininity which figures prominently in his ideal self. Biff ostensibly is a man with outstanding masculinity with his “black and heavy” beard, whilst he is a man of impotence, and “On the fifth finger of his calloused hand there was a woman’s wedding ring” from his mother (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 14). The ring might suggest his remembering for his mother, but more importantly, it indicates the acceptance of, or even attachment to femininity. After his wife passes away, Biff straightens up the drawers, rearranges the shelves in the kitchen, and then bathes himself in the tub. This is his preparation for looking in the mirror for the second time, which is suggestive of a farewell to the past, especially to the past self and a welcome to the brand new and real self. Biff afterwards wears his wife’s perfume in front of the mirror, “and dabbed some of the perfume on his dark, hairy armpits” (McCullers, 1940/2018, p. 203). The perfume is an embodiment of femininity, whereas the unshaven hairy armpits stand for masculinity, and thereby Biff’s behavior is suggestive of a raid of femininity on its counterpart. Standing in front of the mirror, Biff feels a sense of completion which is paralleled by the narcissistic identification with the mirror image that the infant experiences in the mirror stage. Biff covertly exchanges his gaze with his mirror image and suddenly finds that the image that puts on femininity is his real self—some kind of androgynous ideal, as he believes that “By nature all people are of both sexes” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 120). Therefore, in addition to self-examination, the heterotopia of mirror performs another function—self-reconstitution.

From the standpoint of the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. Starting from this gaze that is, as it were, directed toward me, from the ground of this virtual space that is on the other side of the glass, I come back toward myself; I begin again to direct my eyes toward myself and to reconstitute myself there where I am (Foucault, 1986, p. 24).

In other words, by looking in the mirror, the subjects begin to contemplate the relation between the self and the image in the mirror. Although the subjects know that the mirror image is not exactly the same as themselves, they are still enabled to examine themselves on the grounds that their eyes eventually rest on themselves. More significantly, the virtual image can have an impact on the subjects in the real world, enabling the subjects to reconstitute themselves. Biff’s exchange of glance with the mirror image fully embodies this function of reconstitution, as he transforms the fake self with mere masculinity into the ideal self of androgyny.

The reason why I underscore Biff’s androgyny is that his case testifies to the fact that the relation between femininity and homosexuality is not as stable as the one that is engraved on gender norms. Biff seems feminine, and femininity is often “naturally” associated with homosexuality, and in accordance with this logic, Biff is likely to be homosexual; the subject he reconstructs through the mirror may become the subject of coming out of the closet. Though Gleeson-White (2003) admits that Biff is not homosexual as such, she considers the association of homosexuality and femininity “another type of homosexual coding employed by a writer at a time when such a subject was likely to be censored and to provoke social outrage” (p. 65). Nonetheless, I argue that McCullers deliberately makes Biff androgynous instead of homosexual, aiming to subvert the ostensible connection between homosexuality and femininity which constitutes the stereotypical writing of homosexuality. On the surface, Biff not only shows femininity in appearance, but is uninterested in women. In fact, the biological reason why he is not interested in them is his sexual impotence, although impotence is often associated with homosexuality. In Biff’s memory, it can be seen that he used to have sexual relationships with some women, and there is no evidence that Biff is homosexual in the whole novel, as he has never had a desire for men and his feeling for Singer is out of curiosity. Instead, he is most interested in the adolescent tomboy Mick. Furthermore, Biff’s case reveals that masculinity/femininity is no longer limited to the demarcated male/female body, as Butler (1990, 1999) contends that “gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the

consequence that *man* and *masculine* might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and *woman* and *feminine* a male body as easily as a female one” (p. 10).

It is worth noting that the mirror does not merely refer to the physical mirror itself, and persons can also function as the mirror. Though the imaginary takes place in the mirror stage, it does not mean that the imaginary only exists in that stage. The imaginary can still fulfil its function in adults on the grounds that be it infants or adults, the imaginary identification with the object could occur. In this sense, Mick constitutes another mirror image of Biff, a realized one in particular.

Biff, as mentioned before, expresses a keen interest in the grotesques, especially Mick, which indicates that he projects his ideal self—androgyny—onto Mick, for she, an adolescent tomboy, “was at the age when she looked as much like an overgrown boy as a girl” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 120), which perfectly corresponds to Biff’s outlook on androgyny. Moreover, Biff develops a grotesque maternal instinct towards Mick, as he is even desirous to become Mick’s mother. Like the relationship between Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* which “appears to attempt to reproduce the presumptive unity and integration experienced in an earlier phase of development—the mirror stage” (Fowler, 2002, p. 262), Biff in a similar vein seeks to restore the integration between the mother and the infant with Mick. Another critic Gleeson-White (2003) argues that “Biff’s feelings toward Mick are not merely those of a caring parent. There are definite sexual nuances in Biff’s relationship with the young tomboy” (p. 103). However, I insist that Biff’s preference for Mick is a result of the fact that Biff regards her as his mirror, his realized androgynous ideal. Here, it seems that Biff has returned to the mirror stage where the infant begins to identify with the mirror image.

The reason why I underline that Mick is the realized mirror image of Biff is that to some degree, individuals, especially deviant individuals, can form heterotopias which signify not just spaces like prison, asylum, or brothel, as deviants themselves are a site of heterogeneity and contestation. Only in front of the mirror can Biff evince his femininity and temporarily construct his androgynous self. When encountering others, he tries to hide any hint of femininity. As Blount smells the perfume, Biff just calmly replies: “Shaving lotion” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 207). Therefore, Biff’s androgynous self has never been known and is a private self, while Mick has established her real self as a public one to some extent, since she makes no secret of her masculinity and dares to challenge the societal norms. Mick wears boys’ clothes while wandering around the streets, and when Etta is dissatisfied with what she wears, she counters, “I don’t want to be like either of you and I don’t want to look like either of you. And I won’t. That’s why I wear shorts. I’d rather be a boy any day, and I wish I could move in with Bill” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 39). Though Mick is marginalized due to her grotesqueness in town, she evinces certain subversiveness and courage, which corresponds to McCullers’s view on the Southern Gothic literature that “the grotesque is paralleled with the sublime” (McCullers, 1971, 2005, p. 281). Mick, carrying Biff’s dream, is a realized utopia that performs the function of heterotopia. Although Biff realizes self-examination and self-reconstitution by looking in the mirror, wearing perfume, and recognizing Mick as his mirror, what Mick does is more subversive and thus more challenging.

The road in which the subject quests for identity is, for the most part, bumpy. Mick decidedly rejects ideal femininity at first, but she cannot withstand spiritual isolation any more so that she seeks to align herself with the image of the Southern lady when she looks in the mirror for the second time, with a view to joining some kind of community. Similar to Biff, it takes a long time for Mick to bathe herself before self-transformation: “Very slowly she went into the bathroom and shucked off her old shorts and shirt and turned on the water. She scrubbed the rough parts of her heels and her knees and especially her elbows” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 97). To repeat, taking a bath signifies an elimination of the old self, and it seems that Mick has eliminated it thoroughly. She casts aside her boyish clothes and wears typical women’s clothes:

Silk teddies she put on, and silk stockings. She even wore one of Etta’s brassières just for the heck of it. Then very carefully she put on the dress and stepped into the pumps. This was the first time she had ever worn an evening dress (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 97).

Mick makes her image approach the ideal Southern lady and construct her new self, which appears to gain her a sense of belonging. Nevertheless, Mick is full of doubts about her new self after getting her clothes changed: “She didn’t feel like herself at all. She was somebody different from Mick Kelly entirely” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 98). Mick’s doubts make us ponder whether Mick can really construct a female subject that meets social expectations to procure identification and a sense of belonging through feminine dressing, and whether this temporarily constructed subjectivity is stable enough.

#### IV. THE SHATTERING OF MIRROR AND SELF-ILLUSION

Though there’s no mirror in the novel shatters, it has metaphorically broken into pieces, as the mirror cannot perform the functions of constructing selves and endowing identity. According to Foucault (1986), heterotopias function between two extremes, creating either a space of illusion “that exposes every real space, all the sites inside of which human life is partitioned, as still more illusory” or a space of compensation “that is other, another real space, as perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled” (p. 27). To be specific, the example of the space of illusion is brothel where the ethics, morality and regulations are not applied any more, and where the heterogeneous elements are not gainsaid and prohibited. That said, when people exit the very space, everything comes

back to its status quo. Thus, it constitutes a transient space of illusion. On the contrary, there is the space of compensation, e.g. colonies that are designed to be in a state of order and perfectly reflect the ideal of the colonists. In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, the mirror functions as a space of illusion instead of compensation, since it implies that the newly created self is but a transitory mirage.

As is mentioned before, Mick feels uncertain about her new self, i.e. the self of the Southern lady, suggesting that she cannot construct her new self through feminine dressing, and on the contrary, her cross-dressing as a tomboy in essence signifies her real self. Mick plans to hold the party because she is in spiritual isolation for so long that she seeks to join some bunch. However, the party becomes a mess due to the arrival of a group of children, and Mick seems to naturally join in their frolic: “She hollered and pushed and was the first to try any new stunt. She made so much noise and moved around so fast she couldn’t notice what anybody else was doing” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 105). She can no longer bear the new but fake self, and her efforts to assimilate into the ideal femininity are in vain, which is McCullers’s another mockery of the image of the Southern lady.

When Mick looks in the mirror for the third time, she, being the tomboy, has a quarrel with her sister who represents the Southern lady, which echoes the scene where she looks in the mirror for the first time. After her sister Etta is sick, she has to sleep in the living room. The sofa, however, is too narrow, and she falls down in her sleep and gets a bump on the forehead. This time Mick also wants to join the sisters’ chat, and asks her sister’s condition in a friendly way, but she still receives Etta’s cold words: “A lot you care” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 241). Aggrieved and sulky, Mick “pushed back the bangs of her hair and looked close into the mirror. ‘Boy! See this bump I got! I bet my head’s broke’” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 241). The second time Mick looks in the mirror, it seems that she regards her sisters as her mirror image, and she strives to transform herself into a Southern lady, but this attempt is ultimately unsuccessful. Neither the first time nor the third time she looks in the mirror can Mick in truth identify with the Southern ladies represented by her sisters. This identification is nothing but an illusion, as in fact her sisters have never accepted her, nor have others. Mick’s ambivalence towards her selves proves that the self is a dynamic process that involves the potential for changes. No matter whether Mick wears boys’ clothing or changes back to feminine dressing, it is indicated that both masculinity and femininity are performative, as Butler (1999) reveals in the theory of gender performativity:

what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an “internal” feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures (xv).

To put it another way, gender is not inherent but made; language and culture constructs the subject via citation of societal norms, as Mick’s sister Etta and the cook Portia have been citing gender norms to discipline Mick all the time. However, the citation may also fail, leading to the birth of the Other. Biff and Mick are the Others who do not conform to the gender norms in the Southern town; their cases testify to the instability and mutability of gender through their performative femininity and masculinity.

Like Mick, Biff’s self-reconstitution turns out to be hallucinatory, and in this way, his mirror is a heterotopia of illusion as well. In the end of the story, Biff looks in the mirror for the third time if we consider the counter glass as another form of mirror, and the counter indeed functions as the mirror. Distinct from the sense of completion Biff experienced last time, he feels “a warning, a shaft of terror” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 328).

Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face in the counter glass before him. Sweat glistened on his temples and his face was contorted. One eye was opened wider than the other. The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future of blackness, error, and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith. Sharply he turned away (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 328).

Tian (2015) attributes the terror to “the sense of loneliness, crisis, and confusion caused by liminality” (p. 107).<sup>3</sup> Gleeson-White (2003) observes that “The moment of recognition takes place before the mirror, signaling to Biff his ‘real’ self as disguise and his degradation. It is the flat plane that reveals the true/disguised self, further emphasizing that gender identity is a form of surfacial masquerade” (p. 80). I argue that Biff feels terrified because he eventually determines that the androgynous ideal self never exists and the sense of completion and integration he used to feel is finally fragmented. For one thing, only when Biff stands in the mirror can he temporarily construct his new self, which, however, indicates that he will always stay in the mirror stage and cannot enter the symbolic, as his new self is hidden in privacy. Moreover, his father is absent in the novel, and thus “the name of the father”—Lacan’s metaphor for rules and regulations—cannot come into effect; he wears the ring of his mother all the while, implying that he has not successfully got through the Oedipal phase, thereby failing to transform the imaginary subject to the real one.

For another, Mick has never related to or identified with Biff, notwithstanding the fact that she is reckoned by Biff a heterotopia of mirror, a realized utopia. In the conversation with Harry, Mick directly expresses her dislike of Biff Brannon, as she “hate[s]” and “can’t stand” him (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 223). In essence, Biff himself also perceives that his androgynous ideal is but a mirage after Mick reluctantly works in a ten-cent store and has to get

<sup>3</sup> The quotation from this source is my translation from Chinese.

dressed in the way that conforms to the social requirements of femininity: “He watched her and felt only a sort of gentleness. In him the old feeling was gone” (McCullers, 1940, 2018, p. 326).

Like the infant’s identification with the mirror image in the mirror stage, Biff’s identification with Mick is but a misidentification. The mirror stage “represents the first instance of what, according to Lacan, is the basic function of the ego: misrecognition (*méconnaissance*). The ego’s function then is purely imaginary, and through its function the subject tends to become alienated” (Sarup, 1992, p. 83). In sum, the reflected selves Biff and Mick construct through the mirror turn out to be self-illusion, and in this sense, the mirror functions as the heterotopia of illusion.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Carson McCullers, by depicting the dynamic process where Biff and Mick construct and reconstruct their selves, responds to the theme of the quest for identity and belonging. Between the real and the imaginary, the mirror constitutes what Foucault terms heterotopia. The portrayal of the recurrent scenes where Biff and Mick look in the mirror testifies to the significant role that the heterotopia of mirror plays in self-examination, since the heterotopia offers an outside perspective of the Other by which subjects are enabled to examine themselves. Furthermore, the heterotopia of mirror has the function of self-reconstitution because in the mirror and its surrounding space, subjects are capable of inverting the logic in regular spaces, thereby constructing their ideal selves, as Biff constructs his androgynous self, whilst Mick constructs her ladylike self. The mirror, nevertheless, might become a heterotopia of illusion in which the self-reconstitution proves to be illusory. Mick cannot identify with the Southern lady at length, though she ostensibly returns to ideal womanhood in the end of the story. Biff, in a similar vein, cannot identify with Mick, his androgynous ideal self as well as his heterotopia of mirror, and thus the so-called identification is but a misidentification. Nonetheless, the illusion of heterotopias does not signify the pointlessness of the individuals’ efforts; it is the construction and reconstruction of their selves that embody the quandary of the marginalized that calls for attention, and demonstrate that under no circumstances is subjectivity stable or immutable. McCullers (1971, 2005) pays special heed to those grotesques in that their subjectivity is often overlooked but contains subversiveness, and she seeks to prove that “Nature is not abnormal, only lifelessness is abnormal” (p. 276).

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