

The Fugue - Music as A Euphemism in the Works of Carson McCullers and Emiliya Dvoriyanova



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In *Women in the House of Fiction* Lorna Sage writes: "...the novels too treated the domain of character and representation as the place where the 'others' lived, playing their parts and acting out their roles..." (Sage 1992: viii). Sage investigates the impact women writers have had on post-war fiction employing that every novelist tries to probe the boundaries of fiction, to "voice" their views and positions through the language of literature. Using Henry James's metaphor of fiction as a house, however, Sage is indebted to one of the writers she read and wrote about – Angela Carter. It was Sage, as the first-ever critic to discuss Carter's works thoroughly, who noticed that houses are unable to endure holding the woman and her transgressive power at bay. All houses, castles, buildings, every entity that stands for patriarchal power, are eventually destroyed. Sage reads this as an attack from women novelists against their literary inheritance (Sage 1992: ix). Womanhood is a topic widely outspoken and deeply problematic. Each text takes on different ways to construct, deconstruct, explain and see the woman, her body, her role: in society, history, culture. I argue that women writers project a certain amount of personal experience into the fictional worlds they create - an approach Ellen Moers had in *Literary Women* and her reading of *Frankenstein* as Merry Shelly's personified trauma of giving birth. My paper outlines cultural contexts as relevant to the works of different writers. It traces how intentional or non-intentional intertextuality connects texts and motifs; my article seeks to answer how different cultural contexts brought about similar problems. To complete the outlined goals, I rely on close reading of particular texts.

In an interview, the American novelist and Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison commented¹ that she probably was the writer she was because of the extensive reading of other (women) writers. She sees tradition as, more or less, a reading practice that constitutes certain links, connections, ways of understanding that eventually influence writing. My article strongly relies on the idea that intertextual relations in different works of art share similar ideas of otherness, constructed meanings of gender. Moreover, perception of other art forms, such as music, is seen as a probe in an alternative language. Words are not always capable to voice femininity, for this reason, women writers explore the opportunities other expressive structures present. One very persistent metaphor in fiction done by women, who aspire to music, is the *fugue*. The American novelist Carson McCullers devices music to represent her heroines' strong desires. Unable to voice their deepest longings and wishes, they turn to music to express themselves. McCullers herself was dedicated to music, but an unfortunate illness stopped her from becoming a pianist. Autobiographical elements are prominent in her early works, especially in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Very different in nature and experience, Emiliya Dvoriyanova also writes about the *fugue* and the disappearing of self.

There is a remarkable scene in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* in which the leading heroine, Mick, feels such deep and overwhelming emotions that she starts hurting her tights in search of an outlet. "I want...I want" is everything she could utter. What gives her the ability to think, to get an idea of her wishes and desires, is the time when she listens to the radio. Part two of the novel starts with the claim: "This summer was different from any other time Mick could remember." (McCullers 2000: 97). This difference is revealed to be Mick's new relationship to music that actively happens at night when she roams the streets to eavesdrops on neighbours' radios. It is also marked by her active physical change: her body is leaving the indefinite state of a child to enter the threshold of femininity. She can voice her dreams by humming and singing – it is her way to communicate with the world. "She felt like the whole town listened" (McCullers 2000: 102) – Mick feels divided between her longing to be heard and her desire to stay hidden. She secretly listens to music pieces as if intuitively feeling her passion would reveal her new tender self. It is no wonder that she befriends Mr Singer – his meaningful name attracts her the same way as music does, on the other hand, he is deaf so she can voice her deepest thoughts in front of him, relying on that they would remain a secret. It appears that music

¹ This article is part of a project financed by MON (МОН "Млади учени и постдокторанти" от средствата, отпуснати на Факултета по славянски филологии към СУ със заповед на Ректора на СУ N PД 19-39/4.02.2021)

¹ Морисън, Тони: „Аз съм голяма писателка, защото съм голяма читателка": <http://lira.bg/?p=63422> <Last accessed: 09.09.2021>

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guides Mick's state of transition into an adult woman, both by her desire to become a famous musician and her inability to express herself through speech, but in her relationships and finding love. When she thinks of how she had never loved anyone, Mick encounters Mr Singer and flushes. The reaction of the body reveals what Mick had not yet realized: she is attracted to the figure of the "silent Singer".

Michael Smith points out that not only the character of Mick can be seen as "a voice in a fugue", but the whole structure of the novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* imitates the music form of the fugue (Smith 1979). The article examines the three parts of the novel, each of them divided into "voices" to articulate the "unconventional" impact the debut work of McCullers had and still has. Indeed, the fugue as a polyphony can "explain" the inner organization of the book, however, it is also a relevant "tool" for understanding the characters in the novel. Each of them is comprised of inner counterpoints. In Mick's case, it is all about the rocky route to maturity – change in her is not sudden but happens gradually throughout the novel. All her fears, hopes, desires, sexual awakening are connected to her relation to music or Mr Singer.

Emiliya Dvoriyanova's *Passion or the Death of Alice* was published in 1995, and although it is not a debut novel, it shares multiple similarities to McCullers's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Firstly, both authors played the piano as an instrument of choice and later on developed their talents in the field of literature. Dvoriyanova's novel could also be interpreted as a fugue – there is a polyphony of voices talking about Alice and her mysterious death. The plot revolves around the demise of young Alice and the ongoing investigation of the case. Even though it sounds like a crime story, the book is intimately revealing and probing into womanhood and femininity, rather than scrutinizing facts. Alice has her concerns about the body – she seems detached somehow to her own corpus. She does not recognize herself in mirrors or more accurately, mirrors cannot sustain her image. *Passion or the Death of Alice* is not strictly speaking a coming-of-age novel as Mick's story, nevertheless, the uneasiness about Alice's body provokes the same allusion of fluidity, mystery, and tension. Music is Alice's language, a key to understanding her nature and the nature of her disappearance. The fugue is a recurring "explanation" of Alice. It is an alternative, a crevice, a hole in which the heroine might have acquired another, more suitable Self. The fugue in Dvoriyanova's novel is an alternative to the mirror because it provides depth. Disappearing in it, Alice is free of the judging eyes of others. It also reveals a self that is multidimensional, complicated, ambiguous.

Despite the fact that both authors share different cultural and social contexts: the American Carson McCullers is often interpreted in the tradition of Southern Gothic, and the Bulgarian Emiliya Dvoriyanova writes influenced by her philosophical interest in Christianity; their music-bound heroines share multiple similarities. One of the major themes in the works discussed is the alternative to language that both young women need to sustain their Self. The fugue as a euphemism for troubling womanhood persists in both novels: *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* and *Passion or the Death of Alice*. In McCullers's and Dvoriyanova's "house of fiction", the body and the fugue is where the "others" lived, voicing their intimate desires through the play between music and language.

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