Wunderkind Study Guide

Wunderkind by Carson McCullers

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Introduction

Written in 1936, when Carson McCullers was 19 years old, "Wunderkind" was McCullers's first published work. It presents the story of Frances, a teenage girl who has been considered a musical prodigy but who, after years of training and sacrifice, seems suddenly incapable of fulfilling the bright expectations she has always held. In the brief space of a single piano lesson, we see her struggling to recover the confidence and artistry she once knew and trying to navigate a flood of conflicting emotions and desires that threaten to overwhelm her. Often praised as a sensitive, insightful portrayal of the pressures and isolation of adolescence, it is marked by a dramatic tension that increases relentlessly throughout the story—despite the fact that very little "action" occurs. That action takes place in the studio of her music teacher, but the story's actual *setting* is the intimate depths of Frances's troubled mind.

While teenagers and their problems are a common focus in fiction, relatively few "coming-of-age" stories were written while their authors were still teenagers themselves. Critical analysis of "Wunderkind" usually stresses its many autobiographical elements: McCullers had trained as a classical pianist for most of her own childhood and suddenly gave up her ambitions for a musical career after an emotional break in her relationship with a beloved piano teacher. Yet there are also intriguing differences between Frances's experience and that of her author, and while its details are specific to a world of passionate artistry and intense pressures that few of us ever know, McCullers's vivid writing seems to evoke universal human feelings and dilemmas. As a result, readers of all ages, and vastly different experience, have been able to recognize themselves in this troubled young musician.

Author Biography

Born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1917, young Lula Carson Smith studied for years as a concert pianist, practicing five hours a day. Like the character Frances in "Wunderkind" (her first published story), she was devastated as a teenager by the realization that she would be unable to fulfill her high ambitions and expectations for a musical career. However, she soon transferred her energies to another artistic calling, and by the age of 23 had become a bestselling and critically acclaimed writer. Despite a troubled marriage and a series of disabling strokes that would cut her life short at age 50, Carson McCullers produced a body of work that has made her one of the most-admired writers of her generation, and one of the most enduring authors of the American Southern literary tradition.

Her childhood musical ambitions are particularly significant in regard to this story, which critics routinely classify as being "obviously autobiographical." Born into comfortable surroundings, young Carson was encouraged to develop her talents. From the age of six, when she first expressed an interest, her parents provided her with a fine piano and the best available instructors. Unlike Mr. Bilderbach in "Wunderkind," the author's musical mentor was a woman, Mary Tucker. When the former concert pianist moved to Columbus, Carson became her only pupil. McCullers studied with Tucker for four years, forming a close bond with her teacher. At fifteen, she experienced the first of her many health problems, a case of rheumatic fever that required several weeks of recovery in a sanitarium. By her own account (in an autobiographical sketch submitted to *Story* for the publication of "Wunderkind" when she was 19), it was at this point that she "began to question whether she had the necessary physical stamina and the talent to be the concert pianist she fiercely held as her goal."

Added to these doubts was a sudden change in her close relationship with her teacher. As Constance M. Perry relates it:

Suddenly McCullers learned that the Tuckers would be leaving Columbus shortly. With angry feelings of abandonment, McCullers visited Mary Tucker, who was at that time seriously ill, and announced her own intention to abandon the piano. The rupture between teacher and pupil, lover and beloved, remained until McCullers invited the Tuckers to see her Broadway production of *The Member of the Wedding* ten years later.

As Perry's phrase "lover and beloved" indicates, critics have speculated on the nature of this relationship, at least as it appeared to the young student, and particularly in regard to the sexual implications they find in the story itself. Without assuming any physical relationship, they suggest that McCullers's attachment to Tucker may have included an element of sexual attraction, which, according to the moral standards of the time, would have been far more troubling and "shameful" than a teenager's early experiences of heterosexual desire. Such critics generally conclude that McCullers recast the teacher as a male in her story either to avoid any "controversial" reference to lesbianism, or perhaps to distance herself from that aspect of her own experience. Whatever its nature, the relationship was clearly a crucial one to McCullers, and its ending was a

major trauma for her. The nature of that ending is another significant difference between "Wunderkind" and its author's experience: while Frances flees Bilderbach, rushing to leave the room "before he would have to speak," McCullers confronted Tucker dramatically and resentfully. Though she had apparently been thinking of giving up music for quite a while, and had already begun to experiment at writing (encouraged by her parents with a new typewriter), the announcement of her decision seems to have been timed to hurt Tucker's feelings as much as possible.

The family had long expected Carson to study at New York's Julliard School of Music after high school, and despite her changed plans she went ahead with the move, working part-time while taking writing courses at night. Here she found two more artistic mentors, Sylvia Chatfield Bates at New York University and Whit Burnett at Columbia. Burnett was also editor of the prestigious *Story* magazine, and when McCullers wrote "Wunderkind" for his class in the summer of 1936, he agreed to publish it in *Story.* In 1937 she married Reeves McCullers, also an aspiring writer, and moved with him to Charlotte, North Carolina, where she wrote her first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter.* Published in 1940, it sold well and was enthusiastically received by critics. In that same year, she divorced McCullers and moved back to New York; in 1941, she published her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye,* and suffered the first of a series of cerebral strokes. She continued to write, and in 1943 published one of her most highly-regarded works, the novella *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe.*

She remarried McCullers in 1945, but it was an increasingly turbulent relationship; at one point, he began insisting that they carry out a double suicide. Shortly after she divorced him for a second time in 1953, Reeves McCullers killed himself. Subsequent strokes and operations left Carson McCullers partially paralyzed, reduced to typing with one finger, then writing in slow longhand, and finally dictating her work; yet she continued to write. The novel *The Member of the Wedding* was published in 1946, and adapted for the stage in 1950. A second play, *The Square Root of Wonderful*, appeared in 1958, and another novel, *Clock Without Hands,* in 1961. After yet another brain hemorrhage, Carson McCullers died in 1967 in Nyack, New York.

Plot Summary

Frances's Arrival

"Wunderkind" takes place on a winter afternoon in Cincinnati, Ohio, presumably in the 1930s ("the present," when the story was written). Fifteen-year-old Frances arrives at the home of her music teacher, Mr. Bilderbach, for her piano lesson. She is a bit early, and as she sits down to wait we see that she is restless and agitated; her fingers are twitching uncontrollably, and we are told that the sight of them intensifies "the fear that had begun to torment her for the past few months."

This fear seems to be centered on her music, which she has not performed as well lately as once she had. She silently encourages herself to have "a good lesson—like it used to be." As Bilderbach emerges from his studio to greet Frances, her thoughts drift briefly into the past (as they will often throughout the story), and we learn that she has been studying with him for many years—most of her life, as it feels to her now. Their brief meeting only increases her tension, and we see that Bilderbach is also uncomfortable and distracted. The words they exchange seem light and pleasant (he explains that he is "running over a little sonatina" in the studio with a colleague, offers Frances milk and cake, and expresses confidence that she will have "a very fine lesson" today)—but both seem to be affecting a forced cheerfulness they do not feel. Frances tries to smile, but is arrested by the sudden vision of "her fingers sinking powerless into a blur of piano keys"; when Bilderbach makes his comment about the "fine lesson" he expects, his smile seems to "crumble at the corners." Mr. Lafkowitz, the violinist who has been playing with Bilderbach, also comes out and greets Frances familiarly, asking how her work is coming along. Again she seems to be overwhelmed by anxiety, and by a sense of being "clumsy and overgrown," which Lafkowitz seems to bring out in her. She hesitates, and looks uncertainly toward Bilderbach before giving her reply. He says nothing, and we are told only that he "turned away"—but later, Frances is haunted by "the memory of Mister Bilderbach's face as he stared at her a moment ago." It is clearly not a look of reassurance, and she bluntly tells Lafkowitz, "I'm doing terribly." Lafkowitz begins to encourage her, but Bilderbach, already back in the studio, interrupts with "a harsh chord" from the piano, calling him back to the duet they had been playing. As Lafkowitz returns to the music, he calls Frances's attention to "the picture of Heime" in a magazine on the table—Heime Israelsky being Lafkowitz's star violin student.

Waiting for the Lesson

While Frances waits, McCullers takes the reader inside the girl's troubled mind in a hectic series of flashbacks, dreams, and meditations that crowd her thinking, all set to the background music of Lafkowitz and Bilderbach's duet. Opening the magazine Lafkowitz had indicated, Frances sees a portrait of Heime Israelsky, who is being hailed as a "talented young violinist," and appears to be on the verge of an illustrious concert career. Suddenly she shifts to the unpleasant memory of that morning's breakfast.

Frances prefers to skip breakfast and munch candy bars at school, but today her father had served her a fried egg; when the yolk broke and "the slimy yellow oozed over the white," Frances had burst into tears. Whatever the source of this intense emotional reaction, it is the same feeling she has now, as she places the magazine with Heime's photo back on the table.

Closing her eyes and listening to the men's music, Frances feels exhausted, and drifts into the "weary half-dreams" she has been having "just before she dropped off to sleep on the nights when she had over-practiced." Her nightmarish visions are composed of the looming faces of Bilderbach, Mrs. Bilderbach, Lafkowitz, and Heime; of "phrases of music seesawing crazily"; and the repeated German word *Wunderkind* ("miracle child," an artistic prodigy.) These elements swirl around her in grotesque distortion, building to a terrifying crescendo. On some nights, we learn, when she is not so tired, the dreams are simpler and far more pleasant; at such times "the music soar[s] clearly in her head," and she experiences "quick, precise little memories"—not the emotional confusion of her nightmares, or the jumbled memories that tumble through her mind now. After a brief reference to a concert she and Heime have recently given, and the repetition of the word *Wunderkind*, Frances's thoughts turn to Mr. Bilderbach. Her thinking is still restless and disjointed, but begins to follow two distinct paths: a review of the time she has spent as Bilderbach's student, and an effort to account for the crushing difficulties that have plagued her music recently.

Frances has been called a *Wunderkind* for years, and has embraced the musical career others have foreseen for her. She feels her circumstances are disappointingly ordinary, and she regrets her "plain American name," wishing she hadn't been "born and brought up in just Cincinnati." In contrast, the world of music seems exotic and romantic, peopled by accomplished artists with European names and continental manners. We see that Bilderbach has been a caring and inspirational mentor to her. Frances recalls her first lesson with him, at the age of twelve; he was immediately impressed by her technical skill and artistic potential, but challenged her to develop a deeper understanding of the music she plays, and to perfect her ability to play it "as it must be played." In a memorable passage, she recalls his first words to her, while the narrator's descriptions begin to suggest complications in Frances's feelings about him:

"Now we begin all over," he said that first day. "It□playing music□is more than cleverness. If a twelve year old girl's fingers cover so many keys to a second—that means nothing."

He tapped his broad chest and his forehead with his stubby hand. "Here and here. You are old enough to understand that." He lighted a cigarette and gently blew the first exhalation above her head. "And work—work—work—. We will start now with these Bach Inventions and these little Schumann pieces." His hands moved again—this time to jerk the cord of the lamp behind her and point to the music. "I will show you how I wish this practiced. Listen carefully now."

She had been at the piano for almost three hours and was very tired. His deep voice sounded as though it had been straying inside her for a long time. She wanted to reach out and touch his muscle-flexed finger that pointed out the phrases, wanted to feel the gleaming gold band ring and the strong hairy back of his hand.

Bilderbach's task is to help Frances take her playing to the next level, beyond technical ability, to the mature artistry that draws on both the mind and the heart ("here and here"), enabling her to interpret the music with passionate feeling. But her mind and heart are both in turmoil, and the strong feelings music arouses are mixed with other, more disturbing passions. Throughout the story, McCullers flavors her descriptions of Bilderbach with masculine, sensual imagery (in this passage, his "deep voice" that "sounded as though it had been straying inside of her for a long time," his "muscle-flexed finger," the "strong hairy back of his hand"). Such imagery continues throughout the story, strongly suggesting that Bilderbach has become a focus for Frances's awakening sexuality. The "gold band" she wants to reach out and touch is his wedding ring, and her memories drift into a consideration of the Bilderbachs' marriage. Mrs. Bilderbach is described as "quiet and fat and slow," and has been frustrated in her own youthful musical ambitions. The fact that the couple have no children, along with an uncomfortable embrace she once observed, suggests that the Bilderbachs's union is not sustained by physical passion.

As Frances's lessons have continued, she has become almost a part of the household, often staying for dinner and spending the night following her Saturday afternoon lessons. Her musical mission has come to dominate her life; she sees nothing of her high school peers, and Heime has been "the only friend of her own age," as the two often take their lessons together at Bilderbach's. But this "friendship" is a strained one, and Frances seems jealous of Heime's success. She reminds herself of certain advantages he has over her: that he has been playing since he was four, that he has a private tutor and doesn't have to attend school, even that the violin "must be" an easier instrument to master than the piano. Described from her viewpoint, Heime is unattractive and physically immature.

Frances's thoughts return to her recent concert with Heime, which had been a critical triumph for him, but highly unsuccessful for herself—a disappointment that still stuns her months later. Bilderbach had objected to a particular selection for that program, a sonata by Bloch, which showcased Heime's talents but was "inappropriate" for Frances, in his opinion. Although she had wanted to include the piece as much as had Heime and Lafkowitz, she now resents her teacher for giving in and feels "cheated" after the critics agreed that she "lacked the temperament for that type of music."

She now recalls an incident from a year ago, when she played a Fantasia and Fugue by Bach for the two teachers. Bilderbach seems pleased by her rendition, but Lafkowitz suddenly asks if she knows how many children Bach had fathered in his life. When she answers that it was more than twenty, he observes that the composer "could not have been so cold—then." As in the reviews of her concert with Heime, her music is judged to be "lacking in feeling"—but here, Lafkowitz implies that the missing emotion is one of adult (and specifically male) sexual passion. Bilderbach reproaches his colleague in

German, objecting to the mention of such matters to a *Kind* ("child") like Frances. Frances had "caught the point easily enough," but feigns the innocence she feels Bilderbach expects of her.

Another memory of Bilderbach now passes through her mind: when she graduated from junior high, he had insisted on providing her a fancy pink gown for the occasion, taking an active role in shopping for the material and designing the dress his wife sewed for her—despite the fact that the dress makes "no difference" to Frances. In this scene, it almost seems that she is the Bilderbachs' own daughter, and his fatherly enthusiasm and concern that she will look elegant on this "special night" seem to exceed the usual teacher-student relationship. From her tortured present, this memory reflects a happier, secure time, when "[n]othing mattered much except playing the music as it must be played, bringing out the thing that must be in her."

Her playing had been showing improvement then, as it continued to until about four months ago. Throughout her troubled reverie, Frances has been grasping to explain the sudden decline in her performance and the increasing panic with which she has struggled to regain her confidence. The list of Heime's "advantages" is one such attempt; it also includes the fact that he is male, and even that he is Jewish. (Frances seems to feel that Jews are "natural" musicians, and that the elusive quality she failed to express in the Bloch sonata has something to do with her not being Jewish.) The memory of Lafkowitz's comments about Bach not being "cold" suggests another possibility: that she is not yet experienced enough to understand the grown-up passions Lafkowitz feels the composer was expressing. But this explanation doesn't seem sufficient, for she realizes that "she would grow older" and transcend these limitations. She is also aware that the onset of adolescence, and the physical changes it brings, has often ended the careers of promising "kids" who find they can no longer sustain their childhood mastery—but she desperately denies that such a change is happening to her. "Once it was there, for sure," she thinks of her earlier confidence, "[a]nd you didn't lose things like that." But her words seem unconvincing, for as Lafkowitz and Bilderbach end their duet, the nightmare vision of Bilderbach's face, swirling fragments of music, and the term *Wunderkind* sweep over her again.

The Lesson

Bilderbach does not see Lafkowitz out, as is his custom; instead, he remains at the piano, "softly pressing a solitary note." Frances wants to delay her lesson as long as possible, and makes small talk with Lafkowitz about Heime's recent accomplishments—though this is hardly a pleasant subject for her. As she finally settles down to the keyboard, Bilderbach announces that today they will "begin all over" and "start from scratch," recalling his words at her first lesson. But as in his too-cheerful greeting, his manner is false; he looks "as though he were trying to act a part in a movie," and soon drops the act, slouching his "heavy shoulders" and busying himself with selecting the music for her to play. From the start, Frances feels "hemmed in" by the piano keys, "stiff and white and dead-seeming." She knows the notes are wrong as she is playing them; it is as if her hands are "separate from the music that was in her." Bilderbach interrupts

her twice, reminding her how the music should be played, but his urgings only seem to inhibit her playing more. She suggests that his interruptions are hampering her concentration, and he agrees to let her play the piece through, but Frances remains unable to shape the music as she wants to: "her hands seemed to gum in the keys like limp macaroni and she could not imagine the music as it should be." When she finishes, he sums up his response with the single word, "no."

Seeing her desperation, Bilderbach suddenly suggests she play something called "The Harmonious Blacksmith," a simple piece that was one of the first they had worked on together. He speaks with the tone of voice "he used for children," and addresses her by the pet-name *Bienchen* ("little bee"), urging her to make the music "happy and simple," recalling how strongly she had played it in the past. But even this basic exercise is beyond her now. As her panic builds, she feels as if her bones are hollow and her body is drained of its blood, and that her heart is dead, "gray and limp and shriveled at the edges like an oyster." Again the nightmare vision of his throbbing face returns to her; her lips begin to shiver, and tears well up in her eyes. She now gives up entirely, hopelessly whispering, "I can't.... I don't know why, but I just can't—can't any more."

Bilderbach's "tense body" relaxes at these words, and as he rises, she grabs her sheet-music and rushes from the room. She quickly gathers her things, hurrying to leave the house "before he would have to speak" to her. Her last glimpse of him is of his hands, which have held such fascination for her, but are now "relaxed and purpose-less." Frances stumbles outside in confusion, turns the wrong way, and hurries down a street that is filled with images of childhood, "confused with the noise and bicycles and the games of other children."

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Wunderkind is the story of Frances, a gifted teen-aged pianist living in Cincinnati, Ohio in the 1930s. At first Frances exceeds all expectations but comes to discover that she can't maintain her own high standards. Her music instructor, Mr. Bilderbach, calls her *Bienchen*, a term of endearment and reserves her English name for those days when he is especially exasperated with her. To everyone else he refers to Frances as a wunderkind, a child prodigy.

Coming to the music studio is so much a part of Frances' daily routine that she has become like a daughter to the Bilderbachs. Mrs. Bilderbach feeds her apple cake along with other German dishes. Sometimes Frances practices until so late in the evening that she stays overnight with them and returns home on the bus the next morning.

Mrs. Bilderbach is also musically inclined, having been a *lieder* singer in Germany after she and Mr. Bilderbach were married. Now she cooks for her husband or lies in bed reading most of the day, always available to encourage and praise her husband and his students. She doesn't sing anymore but simply smiles all the time and greets the students in her broken English. She is the perfect foil for Mr. Bilderbach's artistic temperament, allowing him to create musical geniuses in the parlor while she bakes in the kitchen.

On the day the story takes place, Frances is glad to get in out of the bitter cold. She can hear Mr. Lafkowitz, the violin instructor, in the other room as she divests herself of her winter garments. Pulling off her mittens, she notices that her hands are trembling. One of her fingers is bandaged because of an injury stemming from the repetitive notes of the fugue she has practiced. Frances wishes the bandage could also cover up the fear that she has been feeling recently.

Mr. Lafkowitz is kind, but Frances feels clumsy in his presence perhaps it is because she is taller than he is although she suspects it is for another reason. He shoves a magazine article about Heime Israelsky at her and she reads that Heime, who is not quite 15, has been invited to play at an important concert in New York. Heime is also a pupil of the music school and because he is the only person close to Frances' age, they are friends. After seeing the article, she can't help but feel a twinge of jealousy.

Looking at the magazine article, Frances fights back the same feeling that she had that morning at breakfast. She had practiced from six to eight and her father fixed her an egg although she would have preferred to snack on chocolate bars at school. Looking at the egg, she knew that if the yellow part broke and ran into the white, she would break down and cry. Of course that is what happened and, seeing the article about Heime, the same feeling of inevitability runs over her

Once she had been the only prized wunderkind of Mr. Bilderbach's studio. She was twelve when she began her studies under him and he told other people of her talent, but never called Frances a wunderkind to her face. The other pupils called her by that name but now that she shares the title with Heime, it seems less a compliment than a taunt.

From the very first lesson, the German-born piano instructor tried to teach Frances that fingers flying over a keyboard do not make a prodigy. Technique is important but ultimately purely functional. Gifted pianists feel the music from the depths of their souls and let the emotion of a piece speak through their hands. Francis now understands that this is true because of the years she has been fascinated by how deftly Mr. Bilderbach uses his hands both on the keyboard and off.

When Heime began lessons at the studio he, too, was referred to as a wunderkind but since he plays the violin, Frances didn't feel that her status was threatened and the two young people became friends. Lately, though, when Heime and Frances perform duets in concert, Heime's performances are praised as superior to hers. Frances ignores the others and hears only that Mr. Bilderbach called her a wunderkind. Frances now hears the word in her dreams as Mr. Bilderbach, his wife, Mr. Lafkowitz, and Heime encircle her singing, the word haunting her nights as well as her days.

Mr. Bilderbach's affection for her may not show at the piano sessions but there have been times when he has treated her like his own child. Although the Bilderbachs do not have children of their own, a wunderkind like Frances would have been Mr. Bilderbach's choice if he could have had the option.

When Frances graduated Junior High School, Mr. Bilderbach took her downtown to buy white pumps and some taffeta and netting so that his wife could make her a dress to wear to her ceremony. He even interrupts the music lessons of other students to monitor the progress of the dress fittings. While perhaps unimportant to anyone else, to Mr. Bilderbach, whose whole life is music, these little interruptions are declarations of love.

On the day the story takes place, Mr. Bilderbach rejects all of Frances' selections and chooses instead a Beethoven sonata at which she is especially adept. His goal today is to get Frances to understand the music, not just the notes. All Frances can see, however, are his hands as they move through the air emphasizing the mood and tone he hopes to impart.

Frances makes her way through the sonata although her mind is foggy and her hands are limp. Mister Bilderbach's disappointment looms over her and fills the room with only one word: no. He tells her to play one of her earliest pieces, the *Harmonious Blacksmith*, a piece he knows that she is capable of playing. Frances watches him intently and studies the smoke from the cigarette held in his fleshy hands.

His impatience cannot give life to her empty heart and hollow bones and she cannot even look at the piano keys. She sobs quietly and admits that she cannot play anymore. Before he is able to move from his seat, she gathers all her things and leaves the

studio, going in the wrong direction on the street where children laugh and ride their bicycles.

Analysis

The emotional fragility and vulnerability of adolescence permeate this story which takes place literally in one afternoon at a music studio but figuratively in Frances' mind. A child piano prodigy, Frances has peaked at the age of 15 and, when eclipsed by a younger friend, is unable to find her way through the personal crisis.

Frances' identity has been built on her musical prowess and now that it is diminished, her sense of self is compromised. She knows intuitively that her teacher has lost interest in her and has grown impatient. This knowledge adds to her stress. In addition, her stress and sense of isolation are beginning to exhibit physically with hand tremors and nightmares which reveal her volatile self image.

The author makes several graphic references to hands in the story by describing the hands of both Frances and Mr. Bilderbach. Clearly they are the instrument of a pianist but as Frances realizes that her stamina and prowess are lagging, her hands shake or lie limply on her knees. The hands of the robust Mr. Bilderbach seem never to be still even when at rest, as if his passion for the music is ready to pour out of the tips. Frances' fingers are tired and one is even bandaged from the pain of repetitive motion symbolizing her wounded spirit which has been worked into exhaustion.

In the poignant ending, Frances is able to gather her things without any dissent from her beloved teacher and walk out of the studio. Interestingly, she turns the wrong way amid the sounds of children playing games. Perhaps this turn will ultimately be in the correct direction, leading her to long-denied pleasures and ordinary days where she is just plain Frances who can play the piano.

Characters

Bienchen

See Frances

Mr. Bilderbach

Mr. Bilderbach has been Frances's piano teacher for three years and is the person whose approval means the most to her. As he has nurtured her artistic potential, they have grown much closer than is usual for a teacher-student relationship; she has become almost a member of the Bilderbach household, often staying for dinner after her lesson, and sometimes even spending the night there. Bilderbach has been both a mentor and a father-figure to Frances, but as the story begins, we see that their fruitful relationship has grown complicated and troubled in recent months and is a source of great anxiety to both of them.

Although he was born in America, Bilderbach's ancestry is Dutch-Czech, and he was raised in Germany. These details make him seem rather exotic and romantic to Frances, who is eager to escape what she considers to be a boring and mundane background. His deep understanding and passionate appreciation of music make him her artistic role-model, and his wise, challenging instruction is crucial to her career. Bilderbach has no children of his own, and it seems that both he and Frances have enjoyed the feeling that his protege is also a kind of "adopted daughter." Her music satchel was a birthday present from him, and when she graduated junior high, he enthusiastically took up the project of providing a fancy dress for the occasion; at such times, it seems that the pride he takes in his talented *Wunderkind* could not be greater than if she really *were* "his own girl."

Physical descriptions of Bilderbach, presented from Frances's viewpoint, are marked by images of masculine strength and virility, suggesting that she feels a sexual attraction for him. Yet on the surface, he doesn't appear to be an especially virile specimen: he has "thin hair," "smoke-yellowed teeth," and a "narrow face"; he wears horn-rimmed glasses, and while his voice is "deep," it is also "blunt" and "guttural." Moreover, he is married and obviously middle-aged, and so would seem to be an inappropriate and unattainable object for her desires. Critics who employ principles of Freudian psychology have made much of the way Bilderbach seems to combine fatherly affection and sexual attraction for Frances, relating it to the so-called "Electra complex," which assumes that an important stage in a girl's sexual development involves feeling desire for the father, and a corresponding jealous rivalry with the mother for his love. Frances does seem to consider Mrs. Bilderbach as something of a rival, and believes that their childless marriage is devoid of sexual passion. But there is no suggestion that she will act on her desires; she and Bilderbach both seem confused and frustrated by them, and nostalgic for her younger days, when their relationship seemed simpler and happier,

and her musical potential seemed unlimited. Frances's dependence on him for musical guidance, and her recent inability to benefit from it, seem to have left them both feeling trapped in a relationship that has grown uncontrollable, and can satisfy none of the hopes they have had for it. When Frances flees from her final, tortured lesson, we are told that "[h]is tense body slackened." He no doubt feels defeated at this point, but this may well be mixed with a sense of relief.

In their failed relationship can be seen the hopeless confusion of two kinds of "passion": the sexual desires the teenager is beginning to experience, and the strong emotions she knows must be an essential part of her mature art. Frances's need to earn Bilderbach's approval through a passionate musical performance is uncomfortably similar to the position of a lover who is anxious to satisfy her partner sexually; in her emotional confusion, she is unable to separate the two "passions." For his part, Bilderbach has hoped to inspire one kind of strong emotion, and is now caught up in feelings he never intended to evoke; he may sense the way things are going wrong, but like his student, seems unable to untangle the emotional web that has caught them both.

Critics who stress the "autobiographical" nature of the story and compare its details to those of McCullers's own childhood musical ambitions, point out a striking difference: if Frances is supposed to "stand for" McCullers herself, then Bilderbach is the fictional representative of her *female* piano teacher, Mary Tucker. If the story's sexual overtones are also "accurate," the discomfort Frances experiences may well have been even more intense for the author in "real life." At least by the moral standards of the 1930s, the very suggestion of homosexual desire would have seemed far more shocking and "unnatural" than a young girl's experience of heterosexual longings, and a story that treated lesbian themes might have faced censorship—even if the attraction were only implied and never acted upon. McCullers's apparent decision to recast her mentor as a male has attracted wide speculation, and adds an intriguing dimension to the many possible "readings" of the story.

Frances

Frances is the story's central character, a fifteen-year-old girl who is undergoing a wrenching emotional crisis in her life. Although the story is narrated in the third person, we experience its events from Frances's point of view, sharing her thoughts, feelings, and nightmarish visions, as her turmoil builds to an explosive, terrified climax.

On the surface, Frances's "problem" is with her music. In recent months, her piano playing has been very disappointing, both to her and to her teacher, Mr. Bilderbach, and as she arrives at his house she silently prays for "a good lesson—like it used to be." This is no small matter, for Frances's life has been centered around her music. Since early childhood she has been considered a *Wunderkind*, a musical prodigy, and, like those around her, Frances has always assumed she would go on to a career as a concert musician. She has prepared diligently for that career, at a considerable personal cost; though she attends high school, she has no social life with her fellow students,

devoting all her non-school hours to her music, and practicing to the point of exhaustion. Her own family appears just once in the story, in a brief, disturbing flashback to having breakfast with her father earlier that day. The story is set not in a family setting, but among the "second family" of Frances's musical world, a set of relationships that seems more primary and vital than those with her blood relatives: her beloved mentor, Mr. Bilderbach, and his wife; Bilderbach's colleague, a violin teacher named Lafkowitz; and (though he doesn't appear directly) Lafkowitz's pupil Heime, who, like Frances, has long been considered a budding musical genius. As Frances's playing has faltered, Heime seems poised to move into the world of adult success that had long been projected for both students.

In itself, this constitutes a crisis in Frances's young life; but as the story unfolds, we see that her musical difficulties are part of a complex inner turmoil, which takes many forms. At times, Frances focuses on her talent itself, doubting whether she is gifted or devoted enough to fulfill everyone's high expectations. But her anxieties extend beyond music, reflecting the many changes and dislocations of adolescence: the confused early stirrings of sexual attraction, fears about the challenges and pressures of adulthood, and a kind of nostalgia for a childhood that seems to be slipping away just as she most needs its comfort and security. Although she is unable to express her conflicting emotions to others, the author reveals them to us; like Frances herself, we are carried along by a relentless tension that builds throughout the story.

Unlike the other characters, we are given no overall description of Frances's physical appearance. In this sense, the reader literally "sees" through Frances's own eyes; we do, for example, have a detailed description of her hands—when she looks down in horror at the uncontrollable twitching of her fingers. We observe the things that are visible to Frances herself—but more importantly, we experience the flood of memories, emotions, and thoughts that rush through her mind. Most of these concern her teacher, Mr. Bilderbach, who is enormously important to her. Their relationship has sustained and inspired her; his wise and patient instruction is to be the foundation of the brilliant career she craves. Despite this, she feels dissatisfied with the circumstances she has been born into, seeming to consider them unbearably ordinary: her "plain American name," the fact that her hometown is "just Cincinnati," not some exotic, faraway place. In contrast, the musical world she envisions is bright and romantic, filled with exotic foreigners and continental elegance; by taking her place in that world, fulfilling her promise as a *Wunderkind*, she expects to transcend ordinariness completely, achieving fame and admiration for her ever-growing artistry.

Frances loves Bilderbach. She reveres his deep feeling for music, and fully appreciates both the tender care and the demanding discipline with which he has fostered her talents. They have grown very close in her three years of study with him, both taking joy in the flowering of her musical powers. He is very much a father-figure to her, and the childless Bilderbachs have come to treat her almost as if she were their own daughter. She often stays for dinner after her Saturday afternoon lesson in their home, and frequently spends the night there. Bilderbach rarely calls her "Frances," preferring a childish nickname, *Bienchen* ("little bee" in German), which reflects his fatherly affection. At one point, he expresses this aspect of their relationship directly: "You see, Bienchen,

I know you so well—as if you were my own girl." Though we have no clear view of her relationship with her own family, the fact that they take up so little of her attention suggests that she considers this her "real family," and feels almost as if she *is* "his own girl." But this wonderful relationship, on which so much depends, has been changing dramatically over the past few months, becoming as frustrating and distressing as it had previously been exciting and productive. The source of these changes appears to be the fact that she is now leaving girlhood, and becoming a woman. Her awakening sexuality, and her growing awareness of the adult pressures she is expected to endure, have eroded and complicated her safe musical "home," and she seems to be feeling an intense (and intensely uncomfortable) sexual attraction for Bilderbach. The nature of the love she feels for him, and her need to please him by investing passionate expression in her music, have grown complex and disorienting, inspiring her with alarming desires, grotesque night-visions, and a cauldron of emotions that threaten to overwhelm her.

As she reluctantly begins her lesson, flounders hopelessly in her efforts to play the music "as it must be played," and finally rushes out of the house—apparently abandoning her musical dream forever—Frances struggles for self-control. Not only is she making no progress, she can no longer manage pieces she had once performed brilliantly. In the "classic" teenage dilemma, she is trapped between childhood and maturity, pulled in both directions but unable to fit either role. Between a childhood of special treatment and immense promise, and a projected future of ambitious achievement, she lives in a terrifying present of utter failure and helpless isolation. Her drive to succeed, and the emotional nature of the music that surrounds her, give her an exaggerated experience of the "normal" displacements and difficult adjustments of adolescence. Her successful entry into the adult world, which she has always assumed and anticipated, now seems an impossible task. Remembering the strength of her bond with Bilderbach in simpler, happier times, she seems to long for a childhood she has largely missed out on. But at other times, she realizes that she has already left much of childhood behind—particularly, its innocent, uncomplicated dreams of accomplishment and fulfillment. As the story ends, she seems completely severed from the bright future she has imagined, perhaps from any future at all. When she flees in desperation, there is a suggestion that she is trying to escape back into childhood, or to outrace time itself. The street she rushes down teems with childhood imagery, "confused with noise and bicycles and . . . games"—but they are "the games of other children," not her own, just as the future she is fleeing will be inhabited by someone else.

Heime Israelsky

Lafkowitz's star violin student, Heime is the only person of Frances's own age with whom she has any close association. Like her, Heime has long been considered a musical *Wunderkind*. He and Frances have often taken their lessons together, and recently gave a joint concert which attracted critical attention. But their musical friendship is also a rivalry, and that aspect of it has intensified lately. Reviews of their concert praised his playing lavishly, but found Frances's music "thin" and "lacking in feeling." Heime has gone on to greater fame and recognition, just as Frances encounters paralyzing difficulties; his success now seems assured, while her own

prospects are gravely threatened. In her desperate effort to understand her crisis, Frances defines herself in opposition to Heime, who takes no direct part in the story but appears frequently in Frances's confused flashbacks.

Heime has been playing since the age of four, longer than Frances has; while she must attend high school, he has always had a private tutor, enabling him to devote even more time and effort to his music. Looking at a photo taken six months ago, Frances believes that he "hadn't changed much," while recent months have brought alarming changes for her; at one point, his hands are described as "babyish," with "hard little blobs of flesh bulging over the shortcut nails." These details suggest that he is still on the childhood side of adolescence, while Frances's sense of being "clumsy and overgrown" and her emotional turmoil indicate that she has been maturing rapidly. He seems unattractive and self-absorbed and has no concern for his personal grooming, often failing even to wash his hands before playing. When they appear onstage together, he is visibly shorter, reaching only to her shoulder; she feels this may have made the critics more sympathetic to him, and more exacting in their judgment of her own playing.

Like Lafkowitz, Heime is Jewish; and like every other musician in Frances's circle, he is male, and presumably of European ancestry. Each difference appears to be an advantage; music is presented as a male-dominated domain, whose greatest achievers tend to be European and, particularly, Jewish. As a "plain American" from "just Cincinnati," and above all as a woman, Frances seems to face obstacles Heime does not. This may appear to be an effort to make excuses for herself, but it also indicates how isolated she is, and how much of "an outsider" she feels herself to be, in the brilliant artistic world she so desperately hopes to join.

Mr. Lafkowitz

A colleague of Bilderbach's, Mr. Lafkowitz is Heime's violin teacher and a significant member of Frances's musical "family." He and his *Wunderkind* pupil are frequent visitors to the Bilderbach home, where Frances and Heime often take their lessons together. At the start of the story, as Frances arrives for her lesson, Lafkowitz and Bilderbach are playing a duet; when they resume, we see that both are passionate musicians, "lustfully drawing out all that was there" in the music. However, while Frances respects his musical ability, as an individual he seems to be an ominous and disturbing force whose intensity and worldliness are threatening to her.

Physically, Lafkowitz is "small," with "a weary look" and a "sallow Jewish face." His mouth is thin, his eyes are "sharp bright slits." The story's detailed description of these eyes provides a key to his personality: when he first speaks to Frances, his brows are arched "as though asking a question," but his eyelids drowse "languorous and indifferent." This suggests a concealed, indirect manner, and his most important conversation with Frances proceeds more by insinuation than by confrontation. Critiquing her rendition of a piece by Bach, Lafkowitz points out that the composer had fathered over twenty children in his life—implying that Frances's playing is "cold," lacking in the mature (and specifically sexual) passion Bach was (presumably)

expressing. Bilderbach disapproves his mention of such matters to a pupil so young, and in his paternal, protective manner toward her, stands in sharp contrast to Lafkowitz. Significantly, Bilderbach is also presented as clearly more masculine; we are introduced to Lafkowitz through his voice, "almost like a woman's, [Frances] thought, compared to Bilderbach's," a voice which spins out his words "in a silky, unintelligible hum." While Bilderbach's criticism of her music is more devastating to Frances, it is blunt and direct, and tempered, at least in her mind, with fatherly concern.

Lafkowitz also plays an important role in Frances's disastrous concert with Heime; it is he who proposes that the final selection be a piece by Bloch, music which showcases Heime's talents but, in Bilderbach's opinion, is not "appropriate" for Frances. Though she had wanted to play the piece as much as Heime and Lafkowitz had, when the critics confirm Bilderbach's judgment, she feels "cheated," and resents him for giving in. Here, as throughout the story, the reader's response to the character is limited by the narrative point of view: the fact that we "see" him only through Frances's troubled eyes. Lafkowitz appears to have promoted Heime's career somewhat at Frances's expense, and her jealousy of Heime's success includes resentment of his teacher. We don't learn enough about Lafkowitz to be certain of his "true intentions" or motivations—but we are vividly aware of his effect on Frances. She even recognizes this confusion, though it overwhelms her; when we are told that "Mister Lafkowitz always made her feel clumsy and overgrown," the statement is prefaced by the realization that he had this effect "without meaning to." Lafkowitz has his unattractive qualities, but is not a full-fledged villain; most of what we see of him is saturated in Frances's own bitter disappointment.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

It is almost a convention for stories about adolescence to express themes of "alienation," by presenting young characters who feel lost and overwhelmed by the pressures of their circumstances. While this may in part be an artistic stereotype of the teenager, it seems also to have some basis in reality: for most people, at least, the years just before adulthood are marked by intense, private emotions, and at least occasional feelings of isolation and confusion.

In "Wunderkind," Frances seems paralyzed by her feelings and sees no one she can turn to for help in sorting them out. In many ways, the tension she feels is not a direct result of the way she is treated, but grows from her own discomfort and self-consciousness, and from the conflicting feelings she projects on others. She recognizes this at times, but the knowledge is of little help to her. For example, Lafkowitz makes her feel "clumsy and overgrown"; to realize that he does so "without meaning to" doesn't change her response to him. And while there is little (if any) evidence that Bilderbach welcomes or encourages the sexual attraction she seems to feel for him, that knowledge makes her feelings no more bearable: it simply means that the object of her desires is unattainable. Both teacher and student seem embarrassed by her changed feelings and are alarmed by Frances's recent musical setbacks. In their desperation, both would like to revert to "the good old days" when she was more obviously a child, when her potential seemed limitless, and their relationship was far simpler and easier. Bilderbach uses his childish nickname for her, *Bienchen* ("little bee"), and as her lesson begins, he proposes that she "begin all over" and "start from scratch"; when it continues to go poorly, he asks her to play "The Harmonious Blacksmith," a simple piece that was one of the first she ever played for him. She resents his condescension, and the fact that his voice is "the one he used for children," but in other ways, she still wants him to be fatherly and protective toward her. When Lafkowitz alludes to adult sexuality in discussing a work by Bach, Bilderbach reproves him in German, using the word *Kind* ("child"). But Frances is not a child; we're told that she "caught the point easily enough." However, she gladly fulfills her teacher's expectation of childish innocence: "she felt no deception in keeping her face blank and immature because that was the way Mister Bilderbach wanted her to look."

Frances's alienation includes the "classic" teenage sense of "in-betweenness," the feeling that she "just doesn't fit"—not in the secure world of childhood she is rapidly outgrowing, nor in the adult world that awaits, nor in the future life that has been projected for her. Her crisis is real and troubling enough, but it is intensified by her alienation and isolation; she is not only overwhelmed by her emotions, but by the feeling that her anguish is something no one else can know, or help her to resolve.

Success and Failure

Unlike most other teenagers, Frances's turmoil is further complicated by the career demands she has taken on from so early an age, and the competitive pressure for artistic success. She cannot remain a *Wunderkind* any more than she can remain a child. The skill and potential she has shown in the past are no longer good enough; it is time for her to approach mature artistry, and significant achievements on the adult level. Readers may even feel she undermines her own musical career: by giving in to its pressures does she flee from Bilderbach himself (who seems to want only to help her achieve her dream), or from what he represents—the obligation to live up to the high expectations everyone has had for her? Her musical ability has always made people treat her as "special" and exceptional; in a sense, her musicianship has been her very identity, never questioned, so much an assumed part of her life that, without it, she may feel she hardly exists at all. (Her final musical failure is depicted in images of physical death and decay: the feeling that "her bones were hollow and there was no blood left in her," her heart "gray and limp and shriveled at the edges.") While the potential for great achievement may magnify one's sense of worth, it also carries the devastating possibility of failure and disappointment. A contemporary psychologist might diagnose Frances's dilemma as a "fear of success," rooted in her suspicion that, however much approval she may receive from others, she is unworthy of their high regard, and in her resentment for the burden of their expectations. According to this way of thinking, it actually becomes preferable to embrace one's own failure than to have to cope with the pressures of competition and success.

In this case, the pressure to succeed is still further complicated, by gender issues: the additional obstacles and challenges faced by female artists and professionals, particularly in McCullers's time. Feminist scholars have made much of this aspect of her work, and the theme is also addressed in her first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* . That book's main character, Mick Kelly, is also a musician, and her artistic career increasingly conflicts with her sexuality. In "Wunderkind," music is presented as a specifically-male domain, and as a vehicle for the expression of a passion that (in Lafkowitz's discussion of Bach) is specifically identified with male sexuality. Her fellow *Wunderkind,* Heime, is seen as having several advantages over Frances: that he has a private tutor, and can devote more time to practicing; that he is Jewish, and therefore (in her mind) closer to the "exotic" world of classical music, which she associates with Europeans in general and Jews in particular; that the music chosen for their big concert together had showcased his talents more than hers. But a more fundamental "advantage" is simply that he is male (like her musical "masters" and most of the great musicians she knows about), and therefore his musical success will not be considered as "exceptional" as hers would be. Such double-standards were long assumed in most artistic fields, and include the notions that worldly achievement of any kind is a contradiction of woman's "natural role" as wife and mother and that female sexuality or psychology are somehow incompatible with "the artistic temperament." Although she quickly achieved widespread fame as a writer, McCullers surely struggled against these social obstacles to her success, and, as this early story reveals, was intensely aware of them from an early age.

Style

Technically, "Wunderkind" depends greatly on the skillful and effective way McCullers establishes Frances's point of view in the reader's mind. Allowing us "inside a character's head" usually leads us to identify and sympathize with that character; but in this case, it is essential to our understanding and central to the story's development. Through flashbacks and internal monologue, the reader is led to discover the elements of Frances's crisis (things we could learn in no other way) and to share her claustrophobic terror.

Perhaps the best way to appreciate this young writer's achievement is to consider how little "action" her story really contains. All we are given is a teenager's piano lesson, lasting perhaps half an hour. The main character is mostly inarticulate, and almost paralyzed by anxiety. She is nervous when she arrives, grows increasingly flustered as her lesson goes poorly, and finally storms out of the house. She struggles to contain and control her feelings, and can say nothing to explain herself to her teacher but a hopeless, whispered, "I can't.... I don't know why, but I just can't—can't any more." Such a scene may rouse our sympathies, disturb us, or intrigue us but, told from any "outside" point of view, the girl's distress will remain largely a mystery. Readers, and other characters, may speculate about its causes; we may even dismiss it as a "simple" tale of failure and frustration, or of a high-strung, temperamental musician. Frances is so isolated in her misery that we must look to her own mind for explanations, though she herself is struggling for explanation. Her thoughts are confused, darting back and forth between the past and the present, between dreams and realities—but through them, the reader learns how her crisis has been building over time, and the terrifying forms it has taken.

The story is told by an "outside," third-person narrator, not by Frances herself. But events are described as they appear to her, and as they occur in her mind. We don't receive any information she doesn't have access to; for example, she is the only character for whom we have no overall physical description. We cannot say what her face looks like—because she can't see her own face. We do, on the other hand, receive detailed accounts of her hands—as she looks down at her own twitching, nervous fingers. We follow her awareness, both of her physical surroundings and of her own thoughts and feelings. In this way, we are forced to adopt her point of view and to work our way through its limitations, reaching for understandings that elude her. Frances's sexual feelings for Bilderbach, for example, are never directly stated—and to accurately convey her point of view, they *cannot* be, for she is only vaguely conscious of them herself. Like the clumsy, uncertain musical phrasing she displays during her lesson, she fully realizes that some of the things she feels are "wrong"—not what is expected from her, not what she expects from herself—and senses that the results will be disastrous. While Bilderbach can pinpoint her musical problems and explain ways to overcome them, there is no one to help her understand the disturbing, unwanted emotions she's experiencing. She applies her considerable intelligence to the problem and traces its outlines, but conscious understanding remains just beyond her grasp. Sympathizing with her, we apply ourselves to the same problem, trying to see what she does not.

The long section leading up to Frances's lesson may seem confusing, and requires close, careful reading, but it allows McCullers to present a great deal of information in relatively few words. Within the few brief minutes it takes for Lafkowitz and Bilderbach to play a sonatina, we pass through three years' time, learning the history of Frances's relationship with her teacher and the recent events that are so troubling to her. We roam freely through her complex feelings and reactions, becoming acquainted with her hopes and dreams, as well as her fears and nightmares. Not only does this passage provide the "background information" we need to understand the story's brief action, but it does so in a way that re-creates Frances's own state of mind. In the "dream sequences"—the visions of swirling, throbbing faces, jumbled-together bits of music, and *Wunderkind* —her terror and helplessness appear most vividly; when this vision returns, at the very end of the lesson, we know that her fears have taken over, and that her self-control is breaking down. But this sense also dominates the story as a whole; even in calmer moments, her thoughts flit restlessly around, soon crowded out by other memories and sudden emotions. It seems that the entire three years is rushing back to her at once, as she casts through her memories and ideas in search of any workable perspective. The "action" in her mind may be difficult to follow, but we realize that this task is no more difficult for us than it is for Frances herself. Like her, we approach insights that never achieve direct expression and experience the flood of emotions that eventually overwhelms her.

Historical Context

The Idea of the Teenager

The category of "teenager" is a familiar, well-established part of our culture; we may not consider that, as a social "type," it is a relatively recent invention. But the idea that one's teenage years are a separate and distinct stage of life has really come into its own only in the twentieth century. While all cultures have their own child-rearing customs and recognize a distinction between the states of adulthood and childhood, the notion of an extended period of transition between these roles has been relatively rare in history. Western societies, at least through the Middle Ages, tended to think of children primarily as "miniature adults," and their dependence on home and family was seldom prolonged. In most cases, children took up productive labor as soon as they were physically capable of it, and through the nineteenth century, people we would now consider young teens routinely took on adult responsibilities of employment, marriage, and family. Undoubtedly, people have always noticed differences in the behavior and outlook of, for example, a 17-year-old and a 35-year-old, but both have, for the most part, been considered "grownups." Although the one was less experienced in life than the other, they were not seen as separate social "types" with different needs and natures. In general, young people were considered as a separate group only at times when members of "the older generation" found themselves shocked by immoral or irresponsible behavior on the part of younger people□behavior which, at least to the older critics, stood in sharp contrast to that of their own youth. This tradition of middle-agers despairing over the outrages of the younger generation can be traced back at least as far as ancient Egypt, and the category of teens or young adults is usually associated with social problems and parental worries.

The "Roaring '20s," just before McCullers entered her own teens, was such a period of heated grownup disapproval. Throughout the Prohibition era, sensational newspapers spread scandals of wild drinking parties, promiscuous "flappers," and dangerous thrill-seeking on the part of "Flaming Youth." The idea of the criminal "juvenile delinquent" (a forerunner of today's teen gang-member) gained currency at this time, and in the years after World War II became a perennial public issue, addressed by government committees, educators, social scholars, and law-enforcement agencies. But another development in the 1950s served to institutionalize the teenager as a figure in American popular culture. These were "boom times," marked by rising middle-class prosperity and the rapid growth of the suburbs; for the first time, large numbers of teenagers had both the leisure and the spending-money to qualify as a distinct economic market. Fashions, music, and entertainment products specifically geared to the tastes and interests of teenagers proved to be profitable investments, and the "youth demographic" has been a major concern for mass-marketing efforts ever since.

Thus, McCullers wrote this tale of adolescence not only from the late stages of her own adolescence, but at a time when the type itself was not yet clearly defined. Teenagers no doubt experienced many of the same feelings other teens had felt throughout time,

and continue to feel; their well-being, and their capacity to strongly disappoint their parents, were common topics of discussion. But their viewpoint was not widely portrayed in popular culture, or reinforced by products and artistic productions reflecting their own concerns and preferences. "Wunderkind" has attracted the attention of critics not only for its artistic strengths and its author's later prominence, but as an early exploration of a social type that has steadily grown more important in our culture. The story has been widely anthologized since it was published, particularly in student readers; by now, several generations of teenagers have read this effort to portray the "unique" pressures and concerns they are supposedly experiencing.

Casual Stereotyping

Modern readers may be disturbed by one aspect of "Wunderkind" that probably received little notice when the story first appeared: its treatment of Jewish characters. This is not a major theme or an essential element in the story, and McCullers doesn't seem to be expressing a particularly vehement attitude of anti-Semitism—but the few references to Jewish characters would likely be considered offensive by today's standards. As such, the story represents a small example of the subtle and unconscious ways racism can work: not only through the vicious, exaggerated stereotyping of a particular group, but in the persistence of racially tinted attitudes and generalizations so widespread that they are seldom questioned. We needn't assume that McCullers intended the characterization to be offensive; she may not even have realized that it could be taken that way, and there is no indication that many readers were troubled by it. Without defending or accusing the author, it is worth the effort to understand how so sensitive a writer could casually display an attitude we now consider controversial.

Mr. Lafkowitz, the violin teacher, is the only character specifically identified as Jewish, but we may assume that a character named Heime Israelsky is also a Jew. Frances resents them, but admires their musicianship, seeing in it a quality her own playing lacks. Music itself, in Frances's mind, seems to be a particularly Jewish vocation, or at least one for which Jews somehow have greater "natural gifts" than other people; it is a romantic, foreign, and exotic world, compared to "just Cincinnati," and at one point she believes that her musical difficulties are partially due to "her not being Jewish." (Bilderbach apparently is not a Jew, but does have an "exotic" European background, and the professional respect of his Jewish colleague.) These thoughts arise in her memory of the concert with Heime, which was a triumph for him but unsuccessful for Frances. In particular, the piece by Bloch seems to have a "jewishness" she is incapable of expressing; the reviewers say that "she lacked the temperament for that type of music," and Bilderbach agrees: "'That oie oie stuff,' said Mister Bilderbach, crackling the newspapers at her. 'Not for you, Bienchen. Leave all that to the Heimes and vitses and skys.'"

Such references may not appear blatantly offensive. After all, Frances seems to feel that Jews are somehow musically *superior* to her, and hopes to emulate their achievements. But this is still seeing them as "the other," people who are different by their very nature; to celebrate a race's supposed "gifts" can be the flip-side of

condemning its alleged "inferiorities." In many Western societies at this time, individual Jews had achieved prominence in the arts and professions, despite facing social discrimination in many forms. Frances's perception of Jews as "natural" musicians mirrors the way many whites have been able to admire black musicians and entertainers, yet continue to discriminate against African Americans as a group. Both cases present the same kind of paradox: the "natural" musical genius that is so admired is seen to be a by-product of the unjust treatment racism has imposed on the "gifted" race, great art that is born from great suffering. While *positive* stereotypes may appear to do little harm, accepting and reproducing them without question can also make negative stereotypes seem more credible.

Critical Overview

Carson McCullers's work was well received in her lifetime by critics and the book-buying public, but the truest measure of her success may be the admiration so often expressed by other writers. Dame Edith Sitwell, for example, has called her "a transcendental writer," combining "a great poet's eye and mind and senses" with "a great prose writer's sense of construction and character." Tennessee Williams once called her the *only* great talent to appear in America since the 1920s. Since her death in 1967, her work has continued to earn the appreciation of readers, writers, and literary critics.

McCullers's novels deal with many of the same themes that can be found in her first short story, "Wunderkind." Her fiction is usually set in the South, and like Frances, her protagonists often exist in a state of psychological isolation, unable to communicate their strong feelings to others. They often have physical disabilities of some kind and lead lives that are unfulfilled in important ways; regardless of their physical condition, they seem to suffer from spiritual incapacities and are continually thwarted in their needs and desires. In an essay on other authors, McCullers once wrote: "Above all, love is the main generator of all good writing. Love, passion and compassion are all welded together." The same could be said of McCullers's own writing. Love and passion seldom work out for her characters, however, leading them to crushing defeats and disappointments; but the compassion with which she depicts their turmoil and loneliness may serve to redeem their suffering. By vividly recreating their misery in the reader's mind, she can be seen to make them more than just suffering individuals, but poignant representatives of the human condition.

As the "first outing" of a writer who went on to notable accomplishments, critics often analyze "Wunderkind" for early signs of the themes and effects that mark her later work. Since it closely parallels events that had recently occurred in McCullers's own life, it is usually assumed to be thinly-veiled autobiography, and critics have closely noted the differences between the story's events and the known facts of the writer's actual experience. The story's sexual implications are often given minute attention—the many sensual images, the way McCullers establishes Frances's conflicted feelings for Bilderbach, and particularly, the fact that McCullers's own teacher was a woman, not a man. The contribution by Alice Hall Petry, included in this unit's critical selections, is representative of this line of analysis. Other critics focus on the presentation of gender issues and McCullers's dramatization of the particular pressures and conflicts faced by women in male-dominated fields, such as the classical music stage of the 1930s; the criticism in this section by Constance M. Perry is a strong example. While the presence of both themes in the story is difficult to deny, it is possible that critics have made too much of them, emphasizing them at the expense of other readings. Her sexual confusion is an important part of Frances's crushing burden, as is the treatment she receives as a female—but these are not her only problems, and may not fully account for the arrest of her musical career. Whichever elements they stress, critics usually consider the story to be an account of adolescence in general, including its disturbing physical changes, the intense emotions teenagers often experience, the early stages of sexual awareness, and the challenging transition from childhood to adult pressures,

demands, and responsibilities. Frances has many problems; they can be defined in many ways, and she herself is overwhelmed by the many ways they manifest themselves. Perhaps the simplest way to account for them is to observe that she is a teenager—a far-from-simple condition, and one that resists easy explanations, particularly when one experiences it directly. In her portrait of Frances, critics find a classic account of adolescent alienation and isolation, which McCullers allows readers of any age to experience in intimate intensity.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

A freelance writer and copyeditor, Faulkner is pursuing an M.A. in English at Wayne State University. In the essay below, he offers a thoughtful exploration of how the writer's experience melds with the crafting of fiction, specifically in "Wunderkind."

In the early 1930s, a Columbus, Georgia, teenager named Lula Carson Smith was bitterly disappointed in her artistic ambitions. While some of the details of her experience are disputed, its basic outlines are clear: Long considered a musical prodigy, having trained for years as a concert pianist and prepared to enter New York's famous Julliard School, she suddenly gave up music entirely and began devoting her energies to a writing career. Her first published work was "Wunderkind," written at age 19, originally for a college writing course. The story concerns a young woman's final, emotional piano lesson, in which she realizes that the musical calling she had hoped for will never materialize. Within a few years, its author was a best-selling novelist (under her married name, Carson McCullers); and, given the known details of her life, it is common for critics (for example, Richard M. Cook) to treat this early story as "obviously autobiographical." Clearly, the plot is *based on* the writer's own experience—but what, exactly, does that mean, and how does it affect our appreciation of the story?

While critical studies may suggest otherwise, the significance of "autobiographical fiction" lies beyond the scholarly detective work of researching the author's life and matching "real life" experiences with fictional characters, events, and effects—thereby revealing the "material sources" of the story. Such knowledge may inform our understanding of the work, and of its author's creative process—but a story is not the same as a memoir. As Alice Hall Petry has observed, early works with clear parallels to their author's lives often "cease to be regarded as fiction," and are treated instead as "source material" for analyzing a writer's later, greater work. Such scholarship surely has its place; but one effect of this approach is that it may encourage students to discount work that seems "merely autobiographical," as if the author has somehow cheated us by reporting real events rather than "making up a story." In practice, the writing of fiction usually involves *both* invention and experience. Writers are traditionally urged to "write what they know," and fiction is commonly understood to be rooted in the author's experience on some level, if not always in its literal details. Autobiographical fiction may draw its energy from events in the writer's own life, but it succeeds through the artful and imaginative *transformation* of that experience: the dramatization of its universal, human elements, in a way that will touch and engage readers whose own experience may be far different from that of the writer. Often, the value of knowing the real-life "basis" of a story lies not in the similarities we can trace, but in the differences between the writer's own circumstances and the fictionalized treatment she has created from the "raw material" of her life.

Many writers keep a journal of some kind; it may take the form of a diary, recording events in the author's life on a regular basis, or a more informal collection of occasional thoughts and impressions. The nature of the writing will depend on the author's purposes, and so will any use the writer may make of it in the future. Sometimes, a

journal entry will evolve into a formal, professional piece, as the writer builds on the insights, emotions, and situations she had recorded earlier, developing their dramatic possibilities. Other writers claim never to re-read their journals, finding value in the very act of writing down their impressions and taking a distinctly different approach to works they prepare for publication. There are many reasons to write about one's own life, even if the work is never shared with others, and the most basic may be that it seems to have a therapeutic value, particularly in times of stress and confusion. The effort to put our feelings into words can help us to "get a handle" on difficult circumstances, or achieve a clearer understanding of ourselves; and when we write from a state of emotional agitation, we sometimes give voice to feelings or insights that normally remain unexpressed. For these reasons, psychologists often recommend that their clients keep journals and go over them periodically in search of perspective on their problems. And of course, one needn't be a professional writer, or a mental patient, to benefit from keeping a journal; though the habit is not widely practiced today, it was once common for "ordinary people" to keep such private records throughout their lives, writing about themselves *for* themselves.

But journals and diaries are not the same as writing about oneself *for others.* Each of us maintains a distinction between our "public" and "private" selves, and avoids revealing embarrassing, unflattering "private details" to others, particularly strangers. For writers, this distinction is intensified: everything they publish is read, and judged, by strangers—and often, it is judged on its "honesty" and "authenticity," its resemblance to "real life." Fiction that takes the author's own experience as its starting-point thus forces a writer to make some difficult decisions, about what to reveal and what to conceal. One strategy is to "fictionalize" the situation, by changing the real-life experience in significant ways: giving characters different names and circumstances, for example, or choosing a setting different from the author's own surroundings. Such changes may be viewed in a negative way—that the author is "hiding behind" her characters, using them to disguise parts of her own life she'd prefer not to "own up to." Critics sometimes interpret the story's Mr. Bilderbach in this way, knowing that McCullers's real-life piano teacher was not a man, but a woman by the name of Mary Tucker—which suggests that Frances' confused sexual feelings for her teacher were, in the writer's own life, an experience of homosexual attraction. By changing her teacher's gender in the story, McCullers can be seen either to avoid a subject that was considered controversial or shameful (particularly at that time), or as disavowing her own experience, perhaps out of concern for her reputation.

Fiction, however, is more than a disguise for "real life," and there are several positive reasons to alter the details of an experience. As a practical matter, life experiences usually require considerable editing before they become stories. The "stories" we live through don't usually unfold with convenient beginnings, middles, and endings; several different "plots" seem to develop at once, and we seldom have all the information possessed by a third-person narrator, who helps explain the action we are reading. Even if we happen to live unusually exciting lives, our day-to-day experiences are seldom as dramatic as the events in artistic productions, and seldom lead to a specific "meaning," or reveal consistent "themes." In shaping it as a story, an author must "re-package" experience, editing out details that don't serve the story's purposes—the

experience, as it was actually lived, is already "changed," even if no facts are altered. Furthermore, experiences don't always make good, or satisfying, stories; storytellers of all kinds are tempted to "improve" their material, in order to make the telling more effective. Consider the kind of family anecdotes that are passed down, perhaps retold each year at holidays: the details and events tend to change considerably over time, and don't always match the memories of those who witnessed them originally. It's not that Uncle Joe or Aunt Minnie are really liars—they just love a good story. As they become caught up in the telling, their imaginations are stimulated; over the years, they may experiment, introducing new material, or different descriptions, and seeing how well the new versions "go over" with their audience. No less than the professional writer of fiction, they are composing and revising their stories, and in the process, they transform the raw material they began with: the actual experience that inspired them to tell a story in the first place. Writers may be seen as people who are fascinated, even obsessed, by this kind of tinkering with the elements of a story.

Unless an author specifically comments on the matter, we can only speculate on the reasons for the decisions she has made—and often can't be certain about just which details *have* been changed. For example, critics may speculate about young McCullers' feelings for Mary Tucker—but it is at least plausible that the element of sexual tension is itself something the author has introduced into the story for dramatic purposes, and was not a significant factor in her own student-teacher relationship. Certainly whether an important character is a man or a woman is no small matter—but still another possibility is that she cast this authority-figure as a man in order to dramatize the unequal status of women in the arts, and the particular pressures faced by females in a male-dominated environment. However we interpret this Bilderbach/Tucker equation, there are other differences between Frances's situation in 'Wunderkind" and McCullers's own experience, which may be equally significant. Frances meekly submits to her defeat, never expressing the emotions that boil within her. She has many resentments, and is driven to find an explanation for her inability to play as she knows she can, but she rushes from Bilderbach's studio, intent on getting out "[q]uickly-before he would have to speak." Her own speech is a helpless, tear-choked whisper, offering no explanation beyond "I can't." But it is consistently reported that McCullers's break with Mary Tucker occurred quite differently: the student confronted her teacher, dramatically announcing her intention to give up music and voicing her resentments over Tucker's decision to move away. In the story, Frances seems drawn to the carefree childhood she has sacrificed so much of for her music; when she disappears in the story's last line, down a street "that had become confused with noise and bicycles and the games of other children," it is almost as if she is escaping back into childhood. She seems unable, and is perhaps unwilling, to take on adult roles and responsibilities; at the end of the story, the future she had counted on is shattered, and her prospects seem bleak and uncertain. McCullers, however, would seem to have recovered from her teenage trauma rather well, confidently moving into a different artistic field (for which she had already been preparing), and quickly achieving fame and respect for her work. While her life took many turns that may be considered tragic, she was hardly the pathetic, defeated figure we see in Frances. In these ways, we can see that McCullers has changed her own "character" for purposes of the story—but not, as we are so often tempted to do in our own storytelling, by showing herself in a stronger, more-admirable light. Instead, the

"actress" she has chosen to play her own part has been deliberately made weaker, less assertive, and less articulate than she herself has been. Frances is not Carson, but someone else *like* Carson in many ways—perhaps a projection of what McCullers might have become if she had allowed herself to be crushed by her emotions and circumstances.

We may imagine that, at the time, McCullers must have *felt* as hopeless and defeated as Frances seems to *be*. By altering and exaggerating her own experience, arranging it to emphasize the desperate confusion and stifling isolation she felt, she dramatizes the kinds of emotions commonly felt by adolescents in all walks of life. Assuming the reader can identify with Frances, McCullers thus achieves something remarkable: She allows us to share a particular experience she has had, by connecting it to our own, similar, experience—though most of us have never studied for a concert career, or known the pressures that confront a child prodigy. This remarkable something is commonly called "fiction." It is not real life, but it involves the magnification of experience, by developing its possibilities and exploring its dynamics. Frances's very specific experience includes the details of "real life," and the story is told in a way that penetrates to the core of her conflict, taking it from a personal level to a more universal one. The story of Carson McCullers's own musical career is intriguing, and dramatic, and must have affected her profoundly. But "Wunderkind" is what she has made of that experience; by her own choice, it is now "the real story" (or rather, one of her many real stories), and the biographical facts are now "source material" in its background.

Source: Tom Faulkner, "An Overview of 'Wunderkind'," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Petry examines the sexual overtones in McCullers's "Wunderkind," and concludes that the underlying sexual crisis in the story stems from the protagonist's sexual feelings for her music teacher.

It is one of the more peculiar phenomena of literary history that once an author becomes critically and/or popularly acclaimed, his or her earliest efforts often acquire a new status. Instead of being approached as discrete works of art, worthy of evaluation on their own terms, too often they tend to be utilized primarily as source material. They are mined for whatever embryonic elements—characters, events, motifs—were destined to reemerge, fully fleshed, in the later, greater works. Or, what is even more intriguing, those early efforts that draw upon autobiographical elements (as do so many) cease to be regarded as works of fiction, and hence they do not attract the kinds of serious scholarly attention which they deserve. Such has been the fate of one of Carson McCullers's earliest efforts, "Wunderkind," written in a creative writing class taught by Sylvia Chatfield Bates, and published when she was only nineteen years old. "Wunderkind" is much anthologized and widely acknowledged as the thinly-veiled autobiographical record of McCullers's "burnout" as a student of the piano while in her mid-teens. It surely is that; but it also is vastly more. If one goes beyond the facile equation of "Frances is Carson," and in particular if one recognizes that the protagonist 's difficulties are considerably more profound than a high schooler's disenchantment with practicing the piano, then it becomes clear that "Wunderkind" is essentially a remarkable rendering of an adolescent's turmoil over her growing awareness of her sexual passion for her music teacher, Mr. Bilderbach; and her turmoil is rendered no less acute by her tendency to regard him as a father figure. As shall be seen, "Wunderkind" features what are considerably more than what Oliver Evans terms "sexual overtones": Frances's sexual feelings for her teacher, far from "confusing" and "complicating" their relationship, are its very basis. They do not mar the story; they *make* it.

Surely "Wunderkind" is one of the most emotionally-intense stories McCullers ever wrote; and part of that intensity is due to the fact that the sources of the young protagonist's turmoil, although they are beginning to dawn on her, cannot quite be articulated by her. Hence the absolute importance of the story's limited point of view: fifteen-year-old Frances is undergoing a crisis; her distress is palpable throughout the story; but it is only through her confused actions, statements and memories (much of "Wunderkind" consists of a series of flashbacks that the reader—far more than Frances —comes to realize that her difficulties are sexual in nature.

The limited point of view is enhanced by the strictures of the story's spatial and temporal setting. In what is apparently less than half an hour, Frances enters the confining arena of the crisis (the living room and studio of her piano teacher), reaches the breaking point and flees from what is virtually an emotional torture chamber. But the impulse to bolt is not really a sudden one: the circumstances leading up to it had been building for at least the three years during which she had studied under Bilderbach, and they had been

intensifying during the previous four months; and they owe infinitely more to Frances's relationship with Bilderbach than they do to her relationship with music per se.

As so often happens in teacher/student situations (especially long-term, one-on-one tutorial arrangements), Bilderbach is more like a parent than an instructor, or what Margaret B. McDowell aptly terms "a second father," [*Carson McCullers*, 1980]. Frances had received her cherished label of "wunderkind" from him three years before, as well as her pet name "Bienchen" (literally, "little bee"). These are both Germanic names, and it comes as no surprise that Frances "wished she had not been born and brought up in just Cincinnati." Longing to deny the American name and identity derived from her biological father (who is given the American generic name of "dad"), Frances would much prefer a background like that of her surrogate father, the Dutch-Czech, German-bred Bilderbach. Frances clearly wishes desperately to please Bilderbach, who paternally gives her lessons in his cozy home, buys her a satchel for her birthday and kindly offers her milk and apple cake. Her distress over being unable to play the piano well—and, concomitantly, the *source* of her being unable to play well—is her overwhelming desire to satisfy the expectations of her father figure. The actual piano playing, then, is less an end than a means.

Even so, it is vital that music be the means by which Frances seeks to please Bilderbach. McCullers is not simply drawing upon her own background as a student of piano; rather, she is drawing heavily upon the capacity of music to evoke intense emotional responses, including sexual ones: "Wunderkind" would never materialize as a story if Bilderbach were teaching Frances to pitch horseshoes. Indeed, the very description of Bilderbach and Lafkowitz's duet underscores the sexuality of the music: "The music in the studio seemed to be urging violently. . ."; the two men were "lustfully drawing out all that was there." Come to that, Lafkowitz's only criticism of Frances's performance of Bach's Fantasia and Fugue is that it lacked sexual passion:

> "Frances—" Mister Lafkowitz had said then, suddenly, looking at her with his thin mouth curved and his eyes almost covered by their delicate lids. "Do you know how many children Bach had?"
>
> She turned to him, puzzled. "A good many. Twenty some odd."
>
> "Well, then—" The corners of his smile etched themselves gently in his pale face. "He could not have been so cold—then."

And Bilderbach himself responds physically to Frances's playing: she could "see his hands rise climactically from the chair arms and then sink down loose and satisfied when the high points of the phrases had been passed successfully." The powerful sexual dimension of the piano music leads to the complex central motif of the story: Bilderbach and Frances respond to each other not just as teacher and student, and not just as father and daughter, but virtually as lover and beloved. And although Frances may not have been aware of this at age twelve, it is becoming frighteningly apparent at fifteen.

The blurring of the pedagogical, paternal and amorous dimensions of Bilderbach is subtle but quite insistent. Frances has watched Bilderbach carefully, as might a student or a daughter: he has a "chunky, guttural" voice and "stolid footsteps"; and she has observed "the quick eyes behind the horn-rimmed glasses." But she also has studied features which, although benign out of context, assume a carnal aura the more they are repeated in the story: "the lips full and loose shut and the lower one pink and shining from the bites of his teeth; the forked veins in his temples throbbing." She also has studied his "muscular back" and has noted that, compared to Bilderbach's, Lakfowitz's voice was "almost like a woman's." Even her recollection of her first lesson with Bilderbach, when she was twelve years old, has an insistently sexual undercurrent of which, in retrospect, she seems to have been vaguely aware: "His deep voice sounded as though it had been straying inside her for a long time. She wanted to reach out and touch his muscle-flexed finger that pointed out the phrases, wanted to feel the gleaming gold band ring and the strong hairy back of his hand." Indeed, even the lessons themselves are couched in sexual terms ("After she had started with Mister Bilderbach . . ."), and, not surprisingly, Frances repeatedly has dreams of vortexes with the face of Bilderbach—his "lips urging softly, the veins in his temples insisting"—at the center. In sum, Bilderbach may seem "crotchety" to an outsider (McDowell), but to Frances he is singularly attractive.

Unlike a good father or teacher, Bilderbach has (albeit apparently unconsciously) been nurturing Frances's sexual response to him and to the music with which he is intimately associated. Hence his surname: although superficially it is a variation of "bilderbuch" (literally, "picture book"), it also echoes "bildner Bach"—a "shaper" or "molder" ["bildner"] of a Bachesque (i.e., sexual) response to music. Indeed, at times he treats Frances like a mistress. After Saturday's lessons, for example, he has her spend the night in his house and return home by streetcar the following morning. Even though her overnight stays are evidently platonic, their resemblance to love trysts could not have been lost totally on either Bilderbach or the adolescent girl who has been wondering for two years why he has no children. Similarly, when Frances graduates from junior high school, Bilderbach personally takes her downtown and selects the cloth for her dress: "His thick fingers smoothed over the filmy nets and crackling taffetas.... He held colors to her face, cocking his head to one side, and selected pink"; he also supervised the sewing of the dress, insisting upon such "grown-up" features as "ruffles around the hips and neck and a fancy rosette on the shoulder." This demonstrates considerably more personal interest than the buying of a book-satchel, and is the sort of behavior few fathers would exhibit, let alone piano teachers. Even Bilderbach's most casual remarks often sound like a man speaking to his mistress: "'You see, Bienchen, I know you so well—as if you were *my own girl*. I know what you have. . . .'" (emphasis added).

Is it any wonder, then, that Frances—looking back at the events, feelings and remarks of the past three years from the vantage point of a budding sexual awareness—is nervous and confused, even distraught, as the story opens? Destined momentarily to be behind closed doors once again with a man to whom she responds physically, and who himself has a confused, quasi-sexual interest in her, Frances irrationally behaves like a woman who is trying to revive a cooling relationship with her lover. She talks to the departing Lafkowitz "to put off going into the studio a moment longer"; she vows to have

a good lesson "'like it used to be"' and she refuses Bilderbach's proffered cake "'till afterward.'" Although in fact this is a girl wishing to recreate the happy, asexual world of her childhood, the very *language* is that of a woman wanting to regain the bliss of earlier coitus, but fearing that it will be unsatisfactory. This astonishing use of language is particularly apparent in the story's climactic scene, the abortive final lesson with Bilderbach.

It opens with Bilderbach, a teacher trying to soothe his student, sounding more like a lover trying to console his mistress for a lack of sexual responsiveness: "'This afternoon we are going to begin all over. Start from scratch. Forget the last few months."' Rather provocatively straddling his chair ("The heavy volume before him seemed to balance dangerously on the chair back"), Bilderbach intensely watches her perform; and the acutely self-conscious Frances, who never used to mind his closeness, now finds that her unresponsive fingers are like "limp macaroni"—an image often associated with impotent males. Bilderbach then suggests that she play "The Harmonious Blacksmith":

[I]mpulsively he squatted down to the floor. "*Vigorous*," he said.

She could not stop looking at him, sitting on one heel with the other foot resting squarely before him for balance, the muscles of his strong thighs straining under the cloth of his trousers....

She could not look down at the piano. The light brightened the hairs on the backs of his outspread hands, made the lenses of his glasses glitter.

"*All of it*," *he urged* . "*Now*!"

She felt that the marrows of her bones were hollow and there was no blood left in her. Her heart that had been springing against her chest all afternoon felt suddenly dead. She saw it gray and limp and shriveled at the edges like an oyster.

His face seemed to throb out in space before her, come closer with the lurching motion in the veins of his temples.... Her lips shook like jelly and a surge of noiseless tears made the white keys blur in a watery line. "I can't," she whispered. "I don't know why, but I just can't—can't any more."

His tense body slackened and, holding his hand to his side, he pulled himself up. (emphasis added).

Were this scene read out of context, one would assume that it was a failed sexual encounter, not a piano lesson. The sexual tension is not lost on Frances: like Rabbit Angstrom, unable to handle the demands and implications of sexual maturity, she runs: ". . . she stumbled down the stone steps, turned in the wrong direction, and hurried down the street that had become confused with noise and bicycles and the games of other children."

It is a child's response to stress; and this regressive behavior is to be expected from someone whose happiest moments came when Bilderbach was just her teacher/father and she was his "wunderkind"—an asexual, prelapsarian world to which she can never return, no matter how hard she runs. After all, a "wunderkind," by literal definition, is a "kind"—a *child*. It was an appropriate label for a twelve-year-old, but at fifteen Frances is occupying the tenuous world of the adolescent. As she has been outgrowing her status as a child, she is simultaneously being pressured into adulthood—and with that transformation comes the awareness (even if it cannot yet be articulated) that she has been responding to Bilderbach on a physical level.

The situation had apparently been coming to a head for at least four months, and both Bilderbach and Frances had been noticing the change. Whether it was due to the onset of menarche (hence the repeated references to "months") or perhaps from masturbation (hence the unexplained sore finger: "The sight sharpened the fear that had begun to torment her for the past few months") or simply her increased awareness of Bilderbach's maleness, the fact remains that the intimacy of a one-on-one situation is something she can no longer handle.

Thus their rather pathetic attempts to deny her budding womanhood. When she cannot play the Beethoven sonata (a mature piece), he assumes the voice "he used for children" and urges her to play a simple, early piece, "The Harmonious Blacksmith." Frances, meanwhile, who feels "clumsy and overgrown" even compared to Mr. Lafkowitz, irrationally insists that she is like Heime, a prepubescent boy ("She was like Heime. She had to be."). No wonder she is so dismayed at seeing his photograph: it is not that he is more successful than she musically, but rather that "*he* hadn't changed much in six months" (emphasis added). She measures herself against a fellow "wunderkind," Heime—a pun on "hymen"?—and is found wanting.

McCullers brilliantly conveys the confused feelings of this girl entering womanhood while longing for childhood by focusing upon the fried egg given to her at breakfast that morning. Although Frances is still enough of a child to prefer eating four chocolate bars instead of breakfast, she is sufficiently trapped in the adult world that she is being forced to eat decent meals: ". . . this morning her dad had put a fried egg on her plate and she had known that if it burst—so that the slimy yellow oozed over the white—she would cry. And that had happened. The same feeling was upon her now [while waiting for her final encounter with Bilderbach]. The egg is a perfect symbol of female sexuality, as well as of embryonic potential that will never be realized. The bursting of the egg is an apt emblem of both a sexual encounter (in particular, loss of virginity) and a difficult situation coming to a head—a quality often evoked in McCullers's fiction. At the same time, the very oozing of the egg suggests a situation out of control, while her seemingly irrational crying over the broken egg is a classic symptom of adolescent anxiety. No wonder the distress she felt at breakfast (with "dad") is identical to that she feels while anticipating the final piano lesson (with her other "father").

The presentation of Bilderbach as Frances's father enriches the complex sexual dimension of the story. At fifteen, Frances is at the age when the adolescent girl reportedly begins to experience what Freud termed the "Electra complex"—a

passionate interest in the father, which must be rejected if the girl is to enter into meaningful adult heterosexual relationships. The act of running "in the *wrong* direction" towards "*other* children" suggests, however, that instead of passing into the next psychosocial stage, Frances is trying pathetically to regain her status as a child. This is regression, not an "act of courage." One can see why McCullers herself vigorously discounted those interpretations which posit "Wunderkind" as simply an embellished autobiographical account of how she abandoned music for writing. Once one becomes aware of the story 's pervasive sexual dimension, one sees that it is virtually a case study of a rite de passage (albeit an abortive one). "Wunderkind" does, to quote Miss Bates, evoke "a mood and a crisis"; but where critics have done the story a disservice is to fail to determine the precise nature of the crisis. In the words of Erik Erikson, "each successive step [in an individual's psychosocial development] is a potential crisis because of a radical change in perspective." And Frances, looking back at the three previous years from the perspective of her newly-dawning sexual conciousness and anticipating an indefinite number of years in close proximity with Bilderbach, cannot face the reality of her situation. Frances's incapacity to play the piano—perhaps, indeed, her *deliberate* (even if unconscious) decision to play poorly so as to disappoint, and hence distance herself from, her teacher—is a symptom of Frances's crisis, rather than the crisis itself.

Purely as a text, "Wunderkind" is thus a remarkable fictional achievement, and especially so considering the youth of the author. But McCullers's precocious skill and sensitivity as a writer seem even more remarkable in light of the possibility that "Wunderkind" is the fictionalized transmutation of her personal feelings for her own teacher. McCullers's piano instructor in Columbus, Georgia, was not a man but Mary Tucker; there is, thus, the possibility that "Wunderkind" offers an embellished, fictionalized account of McCullers's sexual attraction to Mrs. Tucker—but presented, of course, within the "safe" paradigm of a girl's heterosexual feelings for her male teacher. McCullers's uncertainty over how to deal with these lesbian impulses may explain her abrupt and final decision to abandon a musical career when the object of her affections suddenly revealed she was moving to Maryland—a decision so firm and sweeping that McCullers literally would not allow anyone even to mention Mrs. Tucker's name in her presence for many weeks. Hurt by what she apparently perceived as her beloved's abandonment of her, young McCullers struck back at Mrs. Tucker in the only possible ways: in real life, by rejecting her teacher's dream of a musical career for her talented protegee; in fiction, by having the female student, rather than the teacher, do the running away.

The sexual crisis underlying "Wunderkind" was obviously painful for McCullers; but as so often happens in literary history, her personal trauma led to great art. By turning from a career in music to one in literature, Carson McCullers was able to create not only "Wunderkind" but a series of works in an unusually wide variety of literary genres. Her pain was, ultimately, our gain.

Source: Alice Hall Petry, "Carson McCullers's Precocious 'Wunderkind'," in *Southern Quarterly,* Vol. 26, No. 3, Spring, 1988, pp. 31-9.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, Perry offers an interpretation of McCullers's "Wunderkind," asserting that "the essential conflict . . . is how to react to the pressures and distortions of adult sexuality."

["Wunderkind"] reveals McCullers's first trial of the theme she fully develops in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*: adolescence brings a paralyzing knowledge of inadequacy to the exceptional girl and bars her passage into the world of art....

McCullers's first published story, "Wunderkind" (1936), is clearly a preview of Mick Kelly's characterization and situation in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* . Fifteen-year-old Frances has earned a reputation as a "Wunderkind," but suddenly finds her ability daunted by a trio of male faces—her piano teacher, Mr. Bilderbach, his associate, Mr. Lafkowitz, and a young violinist, Heime. Most of all, Frances is disturbed by her sense that her teacher is "looming" over her, "urging" and "insisting" that she perform in a musical world she feels has already shut her out. Mr. Lafkowitz wounds her also when he sarcastically suggests that she cannot play Beethoven with passion, the passion of an artist who fathered twenty children. Male sexuality becomes associated with musical ability as Frances watches her teacher and Mr. Lafkowitz play a duet, "the two of them playing, peering at the notations on the piano, lustfully drawing out all that was there." Recoiling from their masculinity, Frances is unable to express any musical feeling whatsoever. A show of feeling would risk exposure of her inadequate femininity. McCullers's own youthful confusion of musical feeling and sexual feelings for her teacher, Mary Tucker, are recreated in Frances's sexual embarrassment and feeling of exclusion from the world of music. Like young McCullers, the character Frances quits her lessons.

By contrast, Heime, Frances's double in the story, succeeds at fifteen in capturing the admiration of Carnegie Hall. Having begun violin lessons at four, and been privately tutored, Heime makes a happy transition from his *Wunderkind* adolescence to adult masculinity, becoming "young master Israelsky" while Frances is doomed to be a *Wunderkind* and never an artist. In the end, Frances's hands refuse to perform; they tremble and throb uncontrollably as she inwardly wrestles with the dilemma of identity. When her teacher patronizes her, in the voice "he used for children," saying she should play "The Harmonious Blacksmith" if she can no longer master the Beethoven sonata, she flees from her degradation and never returns to the musical studio. Her realization that she cannot match Heime's success so alienates her mind from her body that she can no longer command herself to play. Like Mick in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter,* Frances's ability and desire to be a musician collapse when she realizes that her gender probably thwarts her chance for a success like Heime's in the world of art....

As Louise Westling has shown, the essential conflict for the McCullers's *Wunderkind* is how to react to the pressures and distortions of adult sexuality. In the story "Wunderkind," the world of art is a male world. Consequently, the passion expected of an artist is sensually masculine, related to virility and dominance. No wonder Frances,

the story's budding adolescent girl, quakes before the piano. Mick's sexual initiation proves central to the outcome of her characterization in the novel. Mick finds it impossible to be both a confident artist and a sexually adult female because in her culture female sexuality is shameful and dirty, meant to be mocked in graffiti. Her choices then are to abandon her artistic dream for the safety of conformity or to carry on the dream at the risk of appearing foolish and inadequate. For Mick and Frances, it is safer emotionally to give up the desire to be an artist before they reveal their sexual inadequacy and shame. By the time McCullers created her first novel's heroines, the young author had achieved sexual and social acceptance as a woman by marrying and moving with her husband away from home. From her temporary vantage point, she could look back and create Mick, an autobiographical heroine. For Mick Kelly, like Frances Newman's Katharine Faraday and Sylvia Plath's Esther Greenwood, her first sexual experience crushes her confidence for an artistic life.

Source: Constance M. Perry, "Carson McCullers and the Female 'Wunderkind'," in *The Southern Literary Journal,* Vol. 19, No. 1, Fall, 1986, pp. 36-45.

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt, Cook gives a short overview of McCullers's "Wunderkind," and discusses the author's "gift for recapturing the intense but diffuse feelings of children at critical moments in their growing up."

Most of the sketches written as assignments during 1935 and 1936 are little more than exercises. Their interest for the reader, if any, comes from seeing her work out various technical problems while finding the true bent of her talent. But in the summer of 1936 she wrote a story entitled "Wunderkind," which so impressed her teacher, Whit Burnett, that he decided to publish it in the prestigious magazine *Story,* which he edited. It was her first published piece, and ever afterward Carson McCullers was to declare her occupation as "writer."

An obviously autobiographical story, "Wunderkind" describes a fifteen-year-old girl's discovery during a music lesson that she is not the prodigy she had thought and hoped she was. Her realization, which comes as she rattles helplessly and insensitively over Beethoven's Variation Sonata, not only destroys her image of herself as a brilliant concert pianist but also excludes her from a special circle of musical friends that had become for her an exotic second family. As a "wunderkind" she had enjoyed a special intimacy with exciting and talented people of foreign nationalities—Bilderbachs, Lafkowitzes, and Israelskis. She had, moreover, retained the special privileges and the security that go with being an exceptional child. But as an awkward, normal teenager, expelled from her exclusive, rarefied paradise, she knows she will have to grow up as just another ordinary kid in a world "confused with noise, and bicycles and the games of children." "Wunderkind," like "Sucker," reveals Carson McCullers's gift for recapturing the intense but diffuse feelings of children at critical moments in their growing up. And, as in "Sucker," those feelings are shown to be largely feelings of loss, an overwhelming sense of dislocation from the security of past love—feelings that Frankie Addams in *The Member of the Wedding* is later to describe as being "loose" and "unjoined.". . .

Source: Richard M. Cook, "Carson McCullers's Life," in *Carson McCullers,* Frederick Ungar Publishing Co.,1975, pp. 1-18.

Topics for Further Study

Frances's talent has led her to take on pressures and demands that make her experience of childhood and early adolescence quite different from that of most other children. Our culture shows us many examples of such "prodigies" and the challenges they must face, often with disastrous effects later in life: child actors, students with genius-level IQs who are placed in accelerated educational programs, and athletes in sports like gymnastics, tennis, and swimming. The parents of such children are often torn between two sets of wishes for them: that they receive the training they need to develop their gifts, and that they have a "normal" childhood as a foundation for their future adjustment. Research the lives of three such *"Wunderkinder,"* the ways their parents have tried to balance these needs, and the effects their childhood experiences seem to have had on them. Write an essay that reports your findings, and presents your own conclusions on how such children should best be raised.

In her analysis of "Wunderkind," Alice Hall Petry observes that much of the story's energy comes from "the capacity of music to evoke intense emotional responses, including sexual ones: '"Wunderkind' would never materialize as a story if Bilderbach were teaching Frances to pitch horseshoes." From the earliest ballads, music and storytelling have often been combined: songs of all kinds (from opera to rap) are used to tell stories, while music becomes a central element in "narrative arts" ranging from religious pageants to movies and Broadway musical-as well as films, plays, or stories *about* music and musicians. Choose two examples, in different media (e.g., a film musical and a short story with a musical theme; or a rock opera and the background music in a soap opera), and write an essay tracing the specific ways music works to reinforce the storytelling in each case.

Teenagers—their trials and tribulations, their fads and fashions, their problems with parents, peers, and the opposite sex—appear prominently in cultural productions of all kinds, and are often portrayed in an exaggerated manner. They may be hopeless misfits or love-struck dreamers, lazy slackers or vicious criminals, but their appearance and behavior almost always stands in opposition to the ways of adults. Consider the way teenagers are stereotyped in films, stories, or news reports that are written from an adult point of view, as well the stereotypes of grown-ups in productions geared to teen audiences. Selecting two examples of each kind, compare the stereotypes to the realities you see around you, and explain what these exaggerated portrayals suggest about the way each group views the other across the "generation gap."

Compare and Contrast

1920s: As a child, McCullers practices playing the piano for five hours a day. After a severe illness and an emotional parting with her mentor, she gives up music and turns to a career in writing

1996: The darker side of child prodigy is portrayed in *Shine,* a film based on the true story of David Helfgott, an Australian prodigy who suffered a career-halting psychotic episode as a teenager, but returned to playing several years later.

1930s: President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal sets $5 million of federal funds aside for art and music projects. The Federal Music Project sponsors many musicians, orchestras, and theaters in an effort to encourage further development of American culture and to provide jobs during the Great Depression.

1990s: The National Endowment for the Arts, a federal program which provides grants and assistance to musicians and other artists, is threatened by Republican lawmakers who object to federal funding of the arts and want to drastically cut the program.

1936: Classical music is a popular music form. Some famous composers producing works include Sergei Prokofiev, Aaron Copland, Bela Bartok, and Igor Stravinsky.

1990s: Classical music, while enjoyed by many, does not have the popular appeal it once had. Wynton Marsalis, primarily known as a jazz musician, composes "Blood on the Plow," a Grammy-winning epic classical composition treating the theme of slavery.

What Do I Read Next?

She's Come Undone (1992), a novel by Wally Lamb, is a darkly humorous account of a woman forced to deal with the lifelong effects of growing up in a dysfunctional family.

"Paul's Case" (1905), a short story by Willa Cather, deals with a young man who, much like Frances in "Wunderkind," longs to escape what he considers to be a "common" life.

Mary Bray Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994) examines female adolescence in contemporary America. Pipher, a clinical psychologist, covers issues such as divorce, eating disorders, and sexual pressure.

Perhaps McCullers's most famous work, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) tells the story of a young girl who learns the meaning of loneliness through her association with a group of social outcasts.

Jamaica Kincaid's "Girl," from her collection *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), is a young woman's recollection of her mother's instructions to her while growing up.

Further Study

Brasell, R. Bruce. "Dining at the Table of the Sensitives: Carson McCullers's Peculiarity," in *Southern Quarterly,* Vol. 35, No. 4, Summer 1997, pp. 59-66.

Discusses the treatment of lesbianism in McCullers's work.

Clark, Beverly Lyon and Melvin Friedman, eds. *Critical Essays on Carson McCullers,* New York: Hall, 1996.

Collection of critical essays discussing various aspects of McCullers's work.

Kissell, Susan S. "Carson McCullers's 'Wunderkind': A Case Study in Female Adolescence," in *Kentucky Philological Review,* No. 6, 1991, pp. 15-20.

Analyzes McCullers's depiction of Frances in particular and female adolescence in general

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Cahill, Susan, ed. *Women and Fiction: Short Stories by and about Women,* New York: New American Library, 1975, pp. 180- 81.

McCullers, Carson. *Story,* Vol. 38, No. 2, Winter 1990, p. 98.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

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The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

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Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
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- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
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- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

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