

Loneliness in Carson McCuller's *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

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ABSTRACT: In the novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, it is a darker, more terrifying drama of isolation and despair. The novel, its characterization of Mick and Portia can be seen as a critique towards certain intersecting power structures of the 1930s South, and by that demonstrate the crucial need of inter sectionalized theory when examining those power structures in the characterization of the two characters. With my account of previous research on both Carson McCuller's works in general and her novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* more specifically, I have found that the novel has been read both as political and also as a text concerned with the social and political issues of its time. The major characters, as well as the minor characters, are greatly influenced by their past, their families, and the people they met. Both primary socialization and secondary socialization spell out the future of their lives. Their isolation, resentment, bitterness, rebelliousness or meekness are caused according to Durkheim by many factors such as the material and non - material social facts such as society, environment, church, state, morality, collective conscience, collective representation, and social currents.

Introduction

McCullers gave the novel, the title *The Mute*. But the editor changed it to *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. Its principal theme seems to be an individual's compulsion to revolt against enforced isolation and the individual's urge to express the self at all cost. In other words, the theme is that sense of moral isolation, expressed in terms of loneliness and longing, which is both the social evil of the modern world and the inescapable condition of man. McCullers is often described as Southern Gothic and indicative of her southern roots. However, McCullers penned all of her work after leaving the south and eccentric characters as universal in scope. Her stories have been adapted to stage and film.

ISOLATION IN CARSON MCCULLER'S *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER*

Each character in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* strives to break out of his or her isolated existence. The reasons each character is isolated are very different: the deaf-mute John Singer cannot communicate with most of the world because he cannot speak; Mick Kelly cannot communicate with anyone in her family because they do not share her intelligence and ambition; Biff Brannon is left alone when his wife dies; Dr. Copeland is alienated from his family and from other black people because of his education and viewpoints; Jake Blount is alone in his radical social viewpoints and in the fact that he is a newcomer in town.

The isolation from which each character suffers is a combination of personal and environmental factors. All the characters feel profoundly alone in some sense and all of them desperately need to communicate their feelings with somebody who understands them. All five, with the exception of Biff, confide in Singer the things that make

them spiritually lonesome. Though it is never made clear, the only reason Biff does not discuss his personal conflicts with Singer is most likely because Biff himself is unable to articulate these personal conflicts. Regardless, Biff still finds Singer's presence comforting. After talking to Singer, the characters almost always feel soothed.

McCullers also uses the novel to explore the idea that all people feel a need to create some sort of guiding principle or god. However, whatever each person conceives of in this godlike role is merely his or her own fantasy; it has no basis in reality, just as those who believe in God have no proof that He actually exists. Singer becomes a pseudo-religious figure for the main characters of the novel; they believe he has infinite and unending wisdom about many things, and they turn to him in times of trouble, constantly asking him to help them achieve their goals and assuage their fears and doubts.

Each character creates a different god in Singer. For Mick, Singer is a man who feels as she does about music and whom she can ask very personal questions—things she has never said to anyone before. For Dr. Copeland, Singer is the only enlightened white man he has ever met, the only one who understands the Doctor's burning passion to achieve justice for black people in the world. For Blount, Singer is a man who shares his deep concern about the importance of socialist revolution and the eradication of capitalism. For Biff, Singer is, like Biff himself, a quiet and astute observer of the human condition who ponders many things in great depth. The novel burst upon the literary scene amid reviewer's accolades that the young author was the most exciting new talent of the decade. That she could publish a best - selling novel at twenty-three was feat enough, but to write with a knowledge and insight that so obviously

transcended her years and experience was just short of a miracle.

There are five major characters in the novel Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, Doctor Copeland, and John Singer. It is from the singular relation of the characters to one another that the novel takes its shape. According to Ihab H. Hassan, "What makes the relations singular, literally, is that they are all centripetal, all the characters are singly drawn towards one man, the deaf-mute, Singer, who stands bewilderedly at the center. The novel's structure is broken up to convey the sense of 'mutual isolation; each person remains in a padded cubicle, victimized by the very dreams which nourish his dignity. As the "Author's outline of 'The Mute'" suggests, in reality, however, Singer is *none* of these things; he is merely an ordinary, intelligent man who only wants to be with his friend Antonapoulos. The Singer cannot understand why all these other people come to him for advice on topics with which he has no expertise or even familiarity. It is ironic that Singer a character the others blindly make out to be a sort of god is just as prone to the same blind faith, which we see in his love for Antonapoulos. Singer believes that Antonapoulos is a wise, kindhearted person, and he worships his friend unremittingly. Meanwhile, it is clear to us that all the evidence suggests Antonapoulos is actually coarse, selfish, and lazy. In the end, we see that all the major characters are deluding themselves by believing only what they wish about John Singer. Nonetheless, the very fact that they believe it gives them.

Heroism surfaces most overtly in the novel in the characters of John Singer and of Mick, the least self-absorbed of the major characters and seemingly the only ones capable of feeling genuine, unselfish love for another person. The love Singer feels for Antonapoulos demonstrates the altruism of Singer's nature: he is capable of loving someone completely without receiving any true reciprocation whatsoever. Mick also shows herself to be capable of loving someone for reasons that are not at all self-interested: she feels a deeply affectionate love for her younger brother Bubber and she continues to feel this way even when he distances himself from her.

Both Singer and Blount experience dreams that either is indicative of important aspects of their personalities or support some greater theme in the novel as a whole. Singer dreams that he sees Antonapoulos at the top of a flight of stairs, kneeling and holding something up in his hand. A Singer is kneeling behind Antonapoulos, while Mick, Biff, Jake, and Dr. Copeland are all kneeling behind Singer. This worshipful image perfectly depicts the way that the characters feel in the story: Singer worships Antonapoulos, whereas the other four characters worship Singer. The dream represents the dynamic of the relationships in the novel as a whole.

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Jake has a nightmare at the end of the book that he has had several times before. He dreams that he is in a crowd and that he is carrying a covered basket. He feels anxious because he does not know to whom to give the basket. This dream demonstrates Blount's desire to find kindred spirits who also believe in socialism so that he can give his "basket" of beliefs to them. In the dream, Blount has been carrying the burdensome basket for a long time; in life, his socialist beliefs have burdened him for a long time as well, as there are few people with whom he can share them to relieve his thoughts. The loneliness that the other four major characters — Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, and Doctor Copeland — face makes them see in Singer a certain mystic superiority and consider him their ideas. They seem to find in him all the qualities they wish for him to have. His silence is compelling which makes them consider Singer the repository for the most personal feelings and ideas. McCullers did not, as many reviewers thought, make Singer a deaf-mute because she had a fondness for the unusual as such but because of his symbolic value. His Greek friend Antonapoulos' defect, which is mental as well as physical, is likewise essential to the moral of the story. The fact that Singer's four friends do not see him as really is but as they imagine him, and that Singer does not see Antonapoulos as he really is but as he (Singer) imagines him, suggests that what men see in other men whom they admire or love is not what is really there but what they wish to find. McCullers seems to suggest through this novel that the more grotesque and repulsive a character is who is yet capable of inspiring love in another, the more forcefully does he illustrate this thesis. His attentive silence and thoughtful eyes draw the four people close to him s Mick Kelly, a girl burdened by the care of two younger children, by poverty, and by frustration of her ambition to become a musician; Biff Brannon, who operates an all-night cafe; Jake Blount, an itinerant Marxist, who presently works for a carnival; and Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland, a proud and bitter black physician whose intense commitment to Marxism as the only means of raising the status of blacks has alienated him from most of his friends and relatives. There are two mutes in the novel, one a very fat Greek Stephanopoulos, the other, the Singer, very tall and immaculate. They have no friends and have lived together for ten years. For Singer, "Nothing seemed real except the ten years with Stephanopoulos. Mick Kelly is another important character in the novel. She is the daughter of the owner of the boarding "house where Singer has a room. She has just entered her teens and is always dressed in shorts, a shirt, and tennis shoes. She loves music and is prepared to go anywhere to hear it. To her music is the symbol of beauty and freedom. She has no musical background and has little chance of educating herself. There is no radio in her house. In the summer she walks on the streets of the town listening to any the music she can hear from other people's houses. She starts

reading at the public library and learns from books some of the things she needs to know. In the fall she enters the Vocational High School. She arranges to have primary lessons on the piano with a classmate of hers.

At home, no one realizes what she wants. It is Singer who lets her talk to him when she feels lonely. She begins to center her undirected love on Singer because he fulfills her desire to always have a person to love and admire. It has been pointed out by some critics that Singer resembles Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* of Dostoevsky. There is an aura of holiness about the characters which is associated with their simpli-city. Both the characters inspire confidences in the most unlikely persons. When we read that Singer has in his face "something gentle and Jewish, the knowledge of one who belongs to a race that is oppressed" HLH (114), "a brooding peace that is seen most often in the faces of the very sorrowful or the very wise" HLH (9), we are reminded of the Dostoevsky and doctrine that it is suffering which ennoble and redeems mankind.

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter is neither religious nor political but concerns the struggle of individuals to free themselves from the cells of their beings. Hungry for human sympathy, each of the four characters confides in Singer just as Singer has confided in Antonapoulos. However, each fails to understand that the deaf-mute, although he reads lips, understands little of what he is told. Longing for the sympathetic ear, the four characters, like their deaf-mute idol, create in their own image what one of them calls "a sort of home-made god". From Singer's side, he considers Mick pitiful, Jack crazy, Doctor Copeland hopeful, and Biff thoughtful, but he always welcomes them when they come to meet him. It can be said that the four characters seek Singer's company chiefly because of what they think he has to offer them, not because they wish to offer him anything their own. This point has been elaborated by Horace Taylor. He points out that the selfishness of each character is demonstrated in the scene when all of them meet by chance in Singer's room. It is an awkward occasion.

Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to examine how *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, through its characterization of Mick and Portia, can be seen as a critique towards certain intersecting power structures of the 1930s South, and by that demonstrate the crucial need of sectionalism theory when examining those power structures in the characterization of the two characters. With my account of previous research on both Carson McCullers' works in general and her novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* more specifically, I have found that the novel has been read both as political and also as a text concerned with the social and political issues of its time.

In the first part of the analysis, I have focused on Mick: what intersecting power structures she is either

restrained or privileged by, how those structures shape her experiences, and how she resists or accepts them. I have found that Mick is restrained by notions of femininity based on racial, classiest, and sexist notions and there characterization challenges them through her "inappropriate" modes of behavior. She is also restrained to fulfill her artistic aspirations due to her unprivileged position in the intersection of class and gender. Ultimately, Mick is defeated by the intersecting power structures of race, class, and gender, and not solely because of she a woman or because their are economically disadvantaged, but because of the her position an economically disadvantaged woman.

In the second part of the analysis, I have focused on Portia, a character who hardly any critics have even mentioned. I have examined what intersecting power structures she is either restrained or privileged by, how those structures shape her experiences, and how she resists or accepts them By examining Portia's characterization through an intersectional framework, it has been possible to see how race, class, and gender intersect and thus create notions which she either challenges or internalizes.

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