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CARSON MCCOLLERS:
THE TRAGEDY OF THE GROTESQUE

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of spiritual isolation in her novels, Oliver Evans observed
the "essential loneliness of the individual in a world
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Oliver Evans, "The Theme of Spiritual Isolation in
Carson McCullers," Southern Modern Southern Literature in its
Cultural Setting, ed. Louis F. Rabins, Jr. et al. (Garden
City, N.Y., 1961), p. 131.

Carson McCullers, The Square Root of Wonderful,
(Boston, 1959), p. 14.

THE DARK TRUTH OF CARSON MCCULLERS

The dark truth of human loneliness and spiritual isolation is the central theme of Carson McCullers. In each of her novels, the characters seek a way to break through the barrier of isolation and that condition which makes all people an I rather than a we.

This perception of loneliness is an aspect of life that McCullers deems universal. In considering the theme of spiritual isolation in her novels, Oliver Evans observes that "the essential loneliness of the individual in a world full of other individuals as lonely as himself is a paradox which intrigued Carson McCullers from the first...."¹ McCullers herself explicitly states her central theme in the foreword to one of her plays, The Square Root of Wonderful. She says:

Why does anyone write at all? I suppose a writer writes out of some inward compulsion to transform his own experience (much of it unconscious) into the universal and symbolic. The themes the artist chooses are always deeply personal. I suppose my central theme is the theme of spiritual isolation. Certainly I have always felt alone.²

¹Oliver Evans, "The Theme of Spiritual Isolation in Carson McCuller," South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting, ed. Louis D. Rubins, Jr. et al. (Garden City, N.J., 1961), p. 333.

²Carson McCullers, The Square Root of Wonderful, (Boston, 1958), p. 11.

Indeed, it is this theme of loneliness that McCullers develops to its ultimate conclusion in her novels.

Through the themes of isolation, the frustration of human love in attempting communication with another, and the desperate attempt of passion to shatter the isolation of another human heart, McCullers produces a tragic view of life in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Loneliness more than any other aspect of life encompasses the world of this novel and the lives of the characters who live in it.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is the tender-brutal, realistic-symbolic account of the essential isolation and loneliness of all mankind. Four characters reach out to find a kindred spirit: Mick Kelly, an adolescent girl tortured by her inability to express herself in the music she loves, trapped in the confusion and solitude of adolescence, hurt and warped by her environment; Jake Blount, the Marxist, seeking through brutality and drink an answer to the baseness and ignobility of mill-town life and to the agonies of his own mind; Dr. Copeland, the Negro vainly attempting to find a way of communication for his people; and Biff Brannon, proprietor of the New York Café, pathetically lost and alone, turning to physically and psychologically grotesque people in his search for understanding.

Each of the four finds a kind of love-object in John Singer, the mild-mannered mute, who sits patiently as they come to him to unburden their frustrations. Because

Carson McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (New York: Random House, 1941), p. 81. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be incorporated into the text.

Singer can make no audible response to them, these characters believe that he understands and that he is in agreement with them. Finding in him the hope of communication, they reveal their inner feelings because "they felt that the mute would always understand whatever they wanted to say to him. And maybe even more than that".³ Ironically, though, Singer understands nothing of what they say. He listens politely to them for, as he tells Antonapolous, "they helped take his mind away from his lonesomeness" (p. 80).

Ironic, too, is Singer's attachment to Antonapolous, another mute. Although Antonapolous is almost a moron, Singer finds fulfillment in their relationship. It is the relationship of these two mutes that best symbolizes the tragedy of isolation and loneliness. After Antonapolous is placed in an asylum, Singer, silent and alone, wanders about the town longing for his companion. His desperation is revealed in the following scene:

Singer wandered about the main street for about an hour. In all the crowd he seemed the only one alone. At last he took out his watch and turned toward the house where he had lived.

The street was dark now. The emptiness spread in him. All was gone. Antonapolous was away; he was not here to remember. The emptiness was very deep inside him, and after a while he glanced up at the window once more and started down the dark sidewalk where they had walked together so many times (p. 176).

Standing before the house in which he and Antonapolous had shared a room, Singer realizes what he has lost, and his sense of isolation is almost unbearable. He

³Carson McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter (New York, 1961), p. 81. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be incorporated into the text.

had told Antonapolous everything, and without him he had been "left in an alien land. Alone. He had opened his eyes and around him there was much he could not understand. He was bewildered" (p. 173).

For Singer, Antonapolous is his only human protection against isolation. After the Greek mute dies, Singer is unable to face the invincible solitude and alienation. He returns home and puts "a bullet in his chest" (p. 280), choosing the nothingness of death rather than facing the horror of aloneness in life. But in choosing death, Singer leaves Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, Dr. Copeland, and Biff Brannon confused and alone.

At the end of the novel, one is made frighteningly aware that man is never able to make a total escape from his isolated cell. Although man must attempt to restore a balance between himself and other men, he can, at best, only hope for a partial release from his isolation.

Reflections in a Golden Eye, Carson McCullers' second novel, is set in an army base somewhere in the South. McCullers begins the novel in the manner of a fairy tale. She says:

There was a fort in the South where a few years ago a murder was committed. The participants of this tragedy were: two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino, and a horse.⁴

⁴Carson McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye (New York, 1961), p. 1. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be incorporated into the text.

Throughout the story this fairy tale quality pervades the images. All of the characters, struggling against their fear of loneliness, come to realize that there is no complete escape from isolation. Captain Penderton, with both homosexual and heterosexual tendencies, finds vicarious satisfaction or pleasure in his unnatural attention to his wife's lovers. Mrs. Penderton, the Captain's sexually frustrated wife, seeks release from her frustration in promiscuity. After four nights of marriage to the Captain, she was still a virgin, and "on the fifth night her status was changed only enough to leave her somewhat puzzled" (p. 13). Alison Langdon suffers from physical illness, from the loss of a baby, and from the realization of her husband's infidelity. Anacleto, the Filipino houseboy, is devoted to Alison Langdon and she to him; and the two create a child-like, make-believe world of their own. Private Williams, terrifyingly silent and strange, keeps a secret vigil at the bedside of the sleeping Mrs. Penderton.

A strange, triangular association develops between Captain Penderton, his wife, and Private Williams. While Private Williams is obsessed by the desire to sit near Leonora Penderton's bed as she sleeps, the Captain is haunted by his longing to establish some type of communication with the soldier. McCullers says:

For a long time now [Captain Penderton] had ceased to attribute his feelings

for Private Williams to hate. Also he no longer tried to find justification for the emotion that had so taken possession of him. He thought of the soldier in terms neither of love nor hate; he was conscious only of the irresistible yearning to break down the barrier between them. When from a distance he saw the soldier resting before the barracks, he wanted to shout to him, or to strike him with his fist, to make him respond in some way to violence (p. 104).

In the two years that the Captain had known Private Williams, only a few words had been exchanged between them. Frustrated by the inability to communicate through speech, Captain Penderton kills the soldier in an attempt to break through the barrier of isolation and to establish some kind of identity with him. As McCullers states in "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe," "the lover craves any possible relation with the beloved, even if this experience can cause him only pain."⁵

In general, the actions of the characters in Reflections in a Golden Eye intensify their alienation and sense of aloneness.⁶ McCullers has stripped love of all its pretense to reveal that even in love, the only hope of communication, there is betrayal. While discussing man's inability to communicate, Oliver Evans comments

⁵Carson McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe and Other Stories (New York, 1962), p. 27. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be incorporated into the text.

⁶Ihab H. Hassan, "Carson McCullers: The Alchemy of Love and Aesthetics of Pain," Modern Fiction Studies, V (1959), 316.

on the flaw that exists in love. He says:

Love, powerful though it is, is subject to time and diminishes with the death of the love-object--- besides which, no love is ever a completely mutual experience.⁷

Since the experience of love is never a mutual one, the lover seeks, finds, and then loses the object of his love. The characters in this novel seek to escape loneliness through love; and yet, the horror of solitude remains.

Frankie Addams, twelve years old, over-grown, and "a member of nothing in the world,"⁸ is seeking a way to escape the solitude she has discovered in the adult world. With adolescent sensitivity, she "had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid" (p. 1). The oppression of loneliness had made her aware of each person's separateness. This new awareness is revealed in her hypersensitive response to ordinary happenings. McCullers says:

Things [Frankie] had never noticed much before began to hurt her: home lights watched from the evening sidewalks, an unknown voice from an alley. She would stare at the lights and listen to the voice, and something inside her stiffened and waited. But the lights would darken, the voice fall silent, and though she waited, that was all. She was afraid of these things that make her suddenly

⁷Evans, p. 334.

⁸Carson McCullers, The Member of the Wedding (New York, 1962), p. 1. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be incorporated into the text.

wonder who she was, and what she was going to be in the world, and why she was standing at that minute, seeing a light, or listening, or staring up into the sky: alone. She was afraid, and there was a queer tightness in her chest (p. 22).

Frankie's misunderstanding of the adult world and her adolescent longing come to focus on the wedding of her brother Jarvis. Jarvis is to be married, and Frankie sees her chance to belong to something. She intends to go with the couple and to become a part of them. Her imagined relationship to them is explained in Frankie's own words when she says:

They are the we of me. Yesterday, and all the twelve years of her life, she had been only Frankie. She was an I person who had to walk around and do things by herself (p. 39)....At last she knew just who she was and understood where she was going. She loved her brother and the bride and she was a member of the wedding. The three of them would go into the world and they would always be together. And finally, after the scared spring and the crazy summer, she was no more afraid (p. 43).

But this is an impossible relationship; and after the wedding is over and the couple drive away, Frankie is left lying in the dust crying, "Take me! Take me!" (p. 135).

Berenice Sadie Brown, the Negro cook, is instrumental in helping Frankie overcome the barrier of isolation.

As Ihab Hassan has said, "Berenice is...the rock on which the novel rests....Her understanding of life is as tragic...

as Frankie's misunderstanding is pathetic."⁹ Perhaps it is in the simple words of Berenice that the dark truth of Carson McCullers is best spoken. In her attempt to understand Frankie, Berenice says:

"I think I have a vague idea what you were driving at," she said.
 "We all of us somehow caught. We caught this way or that way and we don't know why. But we caught anyway. I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and burst free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each of us caught somehow all by ourself" (p. 113).

It is Berenice, then, who realizes that there is no total escape from the reality of the adult world with its attendant isolation and solitude.

And although at the end of the novel, Frankie has for the present broken through the wall of isolation, there is no real and total escape for her. After the wedding and after the death of her six-year-old cousin, John Henry West, Frankie finds a friend, Mary Littlejohn, with whom she makes plans; but they are impossible and childish plans which are incapable of fulfillment in the adult world. The two friends imagine that "Mary was going to be a great painter and Frances a great poet--- or else the foremost authority on radar... When Frances was sixteen

⁹Winifred L. Dusenbury gives a similar interpretation of Berenice's position in the play-version in The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama. Dusenbury says that "although Berenice is almost the last of her family and is left sitting alone as the final curtain falls, she has within her a sustaining faith which gives her a feeling of belonging. Her loneliness, therefore, is not internal, and for this reason she can help Frankie develop an emotional maturity."

and Mary eighteen, they were going around the world together" (p. 150). But Frankie's sad awareness will return as it did after she was rejected as a member of the wedding. Even though she has found temporary respite from loneliness in her new friendship, never again will she be able to overcome completely her sense of separateness.

It is in "The Ballad of the Sad Café," it seems to me, that Carson McCullers presents most successfully her own private vision of the tragic isolation of the individual. The characters of this novelette are frustrated and maladjusted, skeptical and, above all, alone. The torment of their inner, mutilated lives is symbolically manifested in their physical deformities.

Amelia Evans is the Amazonian cross-eyed storekeeper who finds a love-object in Cousin Lymon, a hunchback. Her bizarre attraction to Cousin Lymon is similar to the relationship between Singer and Antonapoulos in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter. Amelia, like Singer, is the lover; and in both cases, the love-object (the beloved) is indifferent to the lover. In this association between lover and beloved, the lover is always changed. Amelia's physical appearance is even transformed. McCullers describes her as follows:

...Her brown, long face was somewhat brightened. She seemed to be looking inward. There was in her expression pain, perplexity, and uncertain joy. Her lips were not so firmly set as usual, and she swallowed often. Her skin had paled and her large empty hands were sweating. Her look that night, then, was the lonesome look of the lover (p. 23).

Thus, for McCullers, to love is to undergo definite alteration---this alteration symbolically suggested in the change that takes place in Amelia's appearance.

Although the beloved is the object of unselfish love and devotion, it is always the lover, rather than the beloved, who experiences the most value in the act of loving. In the following lines from "The Ballad of the Sad Café," McCullers explains emphatically the significance of this non-reciprocal relationship:

First of all, love is a joint experience between two persons---but the fact that it is a joint experience does not mean that it is a similar experience to the two people involved. There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries. Often the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored-up love which has lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto. And somehow every lover knows this....

Now the beloved can also be of any description. The most outlandish people can be the stimulus for love.... A good man may be the stimulus for a love both violent and debased, or a jabbering madman may bring about in the soul of someone a tender and simple idyll. Therefore, the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself (pp. 26-27).

Cousin Lymon, a grotesque dwarf, serves as a stimulus for and a recipient of Amelia's love. Amelia's love for Cousin Lymon, however, does not obligate him to love her in return. In fact, Lymon grows to hate Amelia.

Lymon himself is irresistibly drawn to Marvin Macy, Amelia's ex-husband whom she hates. Without hesitation, Cousin

Lymon deserts Amelia because he, too, has become a lover and must pursue his love-object.

Like the characters in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, each character in this novelette pursues his love-object, and yet is never actually able to attain it.¹⁰ Love, as was stated earlier in this chapter, is the only force that can free man from his isolated imprisonment within his own being; yet, love itself is transitory. Once the beloved is gone, love is destroyed and the lover is again alone and isolated.

The last of McCullers' novels, Clock without Hands, presents another variation on the theme of loneliness and isolation. Using the experience of death as a point of departure, McCullers explores again the relationship between love and loneliness. In this novel, it is through the vision of J.T. Malone, a dying man, that the function of love to partially alleviate one's spiritual isolation is revealed. Three other characters, Judge Fox Clane, Jester Clane, and Sherman Pew, who are confronted with their inability to communicate, painfully seek the unifying word or embrace in which they can find some sense of belonging. Although Jester, the Judge's grandson, wants to tell his grandfather that he had been very lonesome all summer, he is not able "to admit this truth aloud."¹¹

¹⁰Evans, p. 335.

¹¹Carson McCullers, Clock without Hands (Boston, 1961), p. 31. Subsequent quotations are taken from this edition and will be incorporated into the text.

Jester is attracted to Sherman Pew, a blue-eyed Negro boy, who reacts negatively to Jester's attentions. While Sherman insists that he does not want any friends, he lied "because next to a mother, he wanted a friend the most" (p. 168). Poignant to the theme of this novel are the tragic words of the Judge. He says: "You can be the most revered citizen in town, or in all the state, and still feel alone. And be alone, by God!" (p. 128).

Hating the 'we' the doctor used when he told him that "we have here a case of leukemia" (p. 62), J.T. Malone suddenly finds himself encompassed by loneliness. During his lifetime he "had never considered his own death except in some twilight, unreckoned future, or in terms of life insurance. He was an ordinary, simple man and his own death was a phenomenon" (p. 2). Similarly, Malone had never given much serious thought to his own life. Facing death for the first time, he begins to understand the horror of his lost life.

While in the hospital for a diagnostic test, Malone had read a copy of Kierkegaard's Sickness unto Death. The following lines, which he read over and over again, made him painfully aware of himself and his plight:

The greatest danger, that of losing one's own self, may pass off quietly as if it were nothing; every other loss, that of an arm, a leg, five dollars, a wife, etc., is sure to be noticed (p. 147).

It was at this point that he began to understand. He admits to himself that "there was no particular time

when he asked, 'Is this all there is of life?...' No, he had not lost an arm, or a leg, or any particular five dollars, but little by little he had lost his own self" (p. 149). There had been no certain time in his marriage when he had stopped loving his wife; and even though he had ceased to love her, he continued to sleep in bed with her. The futility of his life is tragically revealed in his own words as he attempts to explain this action:

Why? Because there was no fitting place to sleep except in bed beside his wife? Working at the pharmacy, sleeping with his wife, no more! His drab livingness spread out before him..." (p. 115).

In his search for identity, Malone also seeks unity and solidarity with mankind. It is in his confrontation with death that he finds himself:

A strange lightness had come upon his soul and he exalted. He looked at nature now and it was part of himself. He was no longer a man watching a clock without hands. He was not alone, he did not rebel, he did not suffer. He did not even think of death these days. He was not a man dying...nobody died, everybody died (p. 236).

And his salvation is love. No longer is he bewildered by the barrier of isolation, and he is once again able to say to his wife: "'Darling, no man has ever had such a wife as you!'" (p. 237). Paradoxically, it is in death that Malone finds his "livingness." McCullers says:

But his livingness was leaving him, and in dying, living assumed order and a simplicity that Malone had never known before. The pulse, the vigor was not there and not wanted. The design alone emerged (p. 241).

In Clock without Hands, J.T. Malone confronts death alone and is able to find his life by losing it. For him, there has been some respite from his isolation. If the novel ended simply with Malone's finding in death an order for his life, it would seem to altogether contradict McCullers' tragic vision. But we are still left with the senile collapse of Judge Glane and with the unresolved relationship between Sherman Pew and Jester Glane. Both adolescents seek some identity, some understanding in each other. With the murder of Sherman, Jester is left to endure his isolation. Sherman's death is tragic because he dies without any sense of fulfillment. His efforts to establish dignity and identity end in his own destruction.

Like these two characters, the major characters in each of McCullers' novels meet with ultimate defeat and failure in their attempts to overcome the oppressive force of isolation and loneliness. McCullers' vision, as seen through her novels and to a lesser extent through her short stories, offers little hope. It is only in her last novel, Clock without Hands, that the hopeless isolation of man is qualified. J.T. Malone does find meaning in life through existentially discovering death and thereby love. Love is the means by which all the characters attempt to communicate, but in most cases they find no real, lasting answer. They remain people spiritually isolated from each other, tragically aware that man's inability to communicate is a kind of living death. For them, the heart is always a lonely hunter.

FUNCTION OF THE GROTESQUE

If it be true to say that Carson McCullers' central theme is human loneliness and spiritual isolation, it is equally true that her theme derives its peculiar force from her use of grotesquerie. Indeed, McCullers' world cannot be separated from the aura of grotesquerie that encompasses it, because it is the quality of the grotesque that symbolically manifests the essential loneliness of the characters in their estrangement from other human souls.

It is not necessary to venture far into a consideration of McCullers' novels in order to realize the significance of her symbols of the grotesque. The casual reader, however, insensitive to the melancholy undertone that exists in her works, may easily be repelled by the quality of the grotesque. Other undiscerning readers may be interested in her use of the grotesque only because of their attraction to the morbid aspects of life. Undoubtedly, the novels may exist as no more than literary freak shows for some readers.

However, it is not McCullers' intention that the reader be repelled or that his morbid curiosity be satisfied.

Rather, for her the abnormal has a functional purpose which serves to illuminate her vision. In discussing the development of McCullers' theme, Dayton Kohler comments on the significance of her use of the grotesque. He says: "The real thing is not the effect of horror she creates, but the enveloping moment which reveals man's capacity for error, cruelty, guilt, self-deception, self-destruction."¹

Many readers, however, unable to comprehend the expressive power in grotesque symbols, demand an explanation. Perhaps the simplest explanation for McCullers' use of grotesquerie is found in Tennessee Williams' introduction to Reflections in a Golden Eye. He answers the question in the form of dialogue:

"Then why have they got to use---?"

"Symbols of the grotesque and the violent? Because a book is short and a man's life is long."

"You mean it's got to be more concentrated?"

"Exactly. The awfulness has to be compressed."²

Since the abnormal and the deformed are physically isolated from the "normal," McCullers uses grotesquerie as the objective symbol of the spiritual loneliness and separateness of all human beings.

McCullers' first novel, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, lacks the intensity of the grotesque that appears

¹Dayton Kohler, "Carson McCullers: Variation on a Theme," English Journal, XL (1951), 421.

²Tennessee Williams, "This Book," Reflections in a Golden Eye, (New York, 1961) p. xiv.

in several of her later works; but, nevertheless, it is informed by the sense of the grotesque. There is only a difference in degree. John Singer, the pivotal character around whom all the major characters revolve, is a mute, and it is his inability to hear and to understand that heightens his isolation. In addition to his physical handicap, there is some intangible quality about Singer that is almost supernatural. Biff Brannon comments:

The fellow was downright uncanny. People felt themselves watching him even before they knew that there was anything different about him. His eyes made a person think he heard things no one had ever guessed before. He did not seem quite human (p. 20).

Although Singer's silence seems to indicate some kind of reserved wisdom, it also contributes to his alienation and somehow makes him superior in the eyes of the other characters. Later in the novel, Brannon actually labels Singer a freak. When he sees Singer invite Mick to join him at his table in the Cafe, Brannon thinks: "Nobody but a freak like a deaf-mute, cut off from other people, would ask a right young girl to sit down to the table where he was drinking with another man" (p. 114). Brannon's observation reflects the normal world's vision of deaf-mutes.

Ironically, though, it is to Singer, the deaf-mute, that the other characters come for understanding. But even as they depend on a deaf-mute in their efforts to

escape loneliness, Singer turns his attentions also to Antonapolous, another mute. His strange attachment to Antonapolous is tragic as well as ironic, because Antonapolous is completely indifferent and insensitive to his love. It is not until the demented Antonapolous is placed in an asylum, that the pathos of their relationship becomes apparent. During Singer's first visit to Antonapolous in the asylum, he presents him with several packages. When Antonapolous finds nothing to eat among the presents, he disdainfully rejects the gifts. But no matter how indifferent Antonapolous is to Singer's love-gifts, he remains Singer's love-object. The degree of Singer's dependence upon Antonapolous is evidenced in the letter that Singer writes to him:

The way I need you is a loneliness I cannot bear. Soon I will come again. My vacation is not due for six months more, but I think I can arrange it before then. I think I will have to. I am not meant to be alone and without you who understand (pp. 184-185).

Just as Singer is unable to comprehend the torment of the other characters, Antonapolous in actuality understands nothing at all. Herein lies the irony and the tragedy.

In addition to the grotesqueness of John Singer and his situation, there are a number of other characters in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter who embody some physical and psychological qualities of the grotesque. Dr. Copeland is a tubercular Negro whose grotesqueness arises

primarily from his inhuman vision of justice. It is "the warring love and hatred---love for his people and hatred for the oppressors of his people---that left him exhausted and sick in spirit" (p. 285). Willie Copeland, another distorted character, has his feet sawed off after they freeze. The anguish of his experience is revealed in the following description:

'This the way it is,' Willie said.
 'I feel like my feet is still hurting.
 I got this here terrible misery down
 in my toes. Yet the hurt in my feet is
 down where my feets should be if they
 were on my l-l-legs. And not where my
 feets is now. It a hard thing to under-
 stand. My feets hurt me so bad all the
 time and I don't know where they is (p. 248).

Willie's feet, the part of him that is cut off, are symbolic of his lost life and his inability to communicate his pain and hurt. Biff Brannon, who is psychologically grotesque, has both paternal and maternal affections. His basic psychological make-up is sexually ambivalent (when he is alone, he likes to put perfume on his ear lobes). Brannon realizes this ambivalence in himself, but he accepts it as normal. He reasons:

By nature all people are of both
 sexes. So that marriage and the
 bed is not all by any means. The
 proof? Real youth and old age.
 Because often old men's voices grow
 high and reedy and they take on a
 mincing walk. And old women some-
 times grow fat and their voices get
 rough and deep and they grow dark
 little mustaches. And he even proved
 it himself---the part of him that
 sometimes almost wished he was a
 mother and that Mick and Baby were
 his kids (pp. 112-113).

His sexual ambivalence is manifested in his "ambivalent feelings of tenderness---towards his dead wife, Alice, towards the adolescent girl Mick Kelly, towards...Jake Blount."³ Jake Blont, a brutish, aspiring social reformer, drives nails through his hands in an attempt to "understand." He is described by McCullers as "the guy who batted his head against walls because he couldn't see any way of getting around them."⁴ Mick Kelly, though a tomboy, is not essentially grotesque; but she is "hemmed in on all sides by characters [grotesque characters]... who are symbolic extensions of her central difficulty---loneliness."⁵

The physically and emotionally deformed characters in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter confront reality and find only the sensation of suffering, the inability to become a member, the horror of loneliness, and the fallibility of love. All live in a world which is unable to give them a satisfactory answer. Biff Brannon is frustrated because he cannot understand. He is always wondering: "What did he understand? Nothing. Where was he headed? Nowhere. What did he want? To know. What? A meaning. Why? A riddle" (p. 202). Mick Kelly expresses her

³Ihab H. Hassan, "Carson McCullers: The Alchemy of Love and Aesthetics of Pain," Modern Fiction Studies, V (1959), 315.

⁴"An Interview with Carson McCullers," News and Observer (Raleigh, Nov. 16, 1941), p. 8.

⁵John Aldridge, In Search of Heresy, (New York, 1956), p. 145.

struggle toward identity in the title of one of her musical compositions, "'This Thing I Want, I Know Not What'" (p. 205).

In The Member of the Wedding, McCullers limits her theme of loneliness by focusing on the lost world of a child. Concentrating on Frankie Addams' perverse misunderstanding of adult life, McCullers restricts her use of the grotesque while she maintains the amplitude of feeling which usually accompanies her grotesquerie. Berenice Sadie Brown, the Negro cook, is grotesque in that she has a glass eye of an incongruous blue which stares off into space. Although Frankie Addams is not a grotesque figure, there is a psychological element of the grotesque in her character. Not only is she drawn to circus freaks out of curiosity, but also she feels some kind of terrifying link between herself and these freaks. She even has the exaggerated fear that she will grow into a giant freak, which symbolically suggests her fear of spiritual isolation. Frankie's apprehensiveness is revealed in the following description:

This summer she was grown so tall that she was almost a big freak, and her shoulders were narrow, her legs too long... (p. 2).
 Already the hateful little summer children hollered to her: 'Is it cold up there?' And the comments of grown people made Frankie shrivel on her heels....
 According to mathematics and unless she could somehow stop herself, she would grow to be over nine feet tall. And what would be a lady who is over nine feet high? She would be a Freak (p. 16).

This physical awkwardness which Frankie interprets as freakishness intensifies her sense of isolation. Portrayed as an adolescent lost in the limbo between childhood and womanhood, Frankie is obviously an extension of Mick Kelly, the frustrated adolescent in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Frankie, like Mick, struggles for recognition and cries out against the unseen powers that have doomed her to loneliness.

The three main characters, Frankie Addams, Berenice Sadie Brown, and John Henry West, inhabit a strange kitchen world "that was a sad and ugly room. John Henry had covered the walls with queer, child drawings, as far up as his arm would reach. This gave the kitchen a crazy look, like that of a room in a crazy-house" (p. 4). In addition to the paintings on the wall which are left unfinished, there is another element in the novel which strengthens this sense of imperfection and disorder.

One evening as Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry sit at the dinner table, the continuous sounds of a piano being tuned penetrate the silence of their kitchen world. The sounds persist, and the tuning is never finished. They listen in anticipation:

In the silence of the kitchen they heard the tone shaft quietly across the room, then again the same note was repeated. A piano scale slanted across the August afternoon. A chord was struck. Then in a dreaming way a chain of chords climbed slowly upward like a flight of castle stairs: but just at the end, when the eighth

chord should have sounded and the scale made complete, there was a stop. This next to the last chord was repeated. The seventh chord, which seems to echo all of the unfinished scale, struck and insisted again and again (p. 81).

Later on, Frankie comments on this sound:

"It makes me sad," [Frankie] said. "And jittery too." She began to walk around the room. "They tell me that when they want to punish them over in Milledgeville [an asylum], they tie them up and make them listen to piano-tuning" (p. 82).

This incomplete world of chaos and confusion is a symbol of the larger world into which Frankie seeks initiation. The unresolved scale leaves Frankie suspended in expectation of its completion. Frankie herself is incomplete, and she seeks to join with someone or something.

It is in this incomplete world of tragic reality that Frankie comes to realize she can never be a member of the wedding. Through her intense agonies of growth and the search for identity, McCullers expresses again her central theme of isolation.

In McCullers' last novel, Clock without Hands, the seeming impossibility of human communication is expressed in the characters of J.T. Malone, Judge Fox Clane, Jester Clane, and Sherman Pew. Each has some element of grotesquerie which reinforces McCullers' theme. Viewing the town which these characters inhabit through the eyes of Jester Clane, one sees man caught up in the dizziness of life. Jester describes an aerial view of

Milan: life and son. He has a tendency to react with

Looking downward from an aerial aspect
altitude of two thousand feet,
the earth assumes order. A
town, even Milan, is symmetrical,
exact as a small gray honeycomb,
complete.... From this height
you do not see man and the details
of his humiliation. The earth
from a great distance is perfect
and whole.

But this is an order foreign
to the heart, and to love the
earth you must come closer....
As you circle inward, the town
itself becomes crazy and complex.
You see the secret corners of all
the sad back yards. Gray fences,
factories, the flat main street.
From the air men are shrunken and
they have an automatic look, like
wound-up dolls. They seem to move
mechanically among haphazard mis-
eries (pp. 233-34).

The characters in Clock without Hands move in this world
of "haphazard miseries," seeking to escape isolation
and loneliness.

J.T. Malone, a man dying of leukemia, is obsessed
by a terror that "concerned some mysterious drama that
was going on---although what the drama was about Malone
did not know. The terror questioned what would happen
in those months---how long?... He was a man watching a
clock without hands" (p. 25). The bizarre image of a
"clock without hands" operates throughout the novel and
intensifies Malone's awareness of time.

Certain elements of Judge Fox Clane's character
are grotesque and at times repulsive. The Judge, whose
left hand had been drawn by a stroke, grieves for his

dead wife and son. He has a tendency to react with hysteria to the confusions of life. This abnormal aspect of his character is revealed to Jester, the Judge's grandson. The Judge explains:

"Hysterics is not laughter, Son. It's a panic reaction of confusion when you cannot grieve. I was hysterical for four days and nights after my son's death.... There I was hysterical and the corpse of my son laid out in the parlor" (p. 193).

The Judge's inclination to respond to tragic situations with hysteria is a manifestation of his inability to communicate his affections in much the same way that Sherman Pew's blue eyes are a symbol of his inability to belong.

It is in the grotesque actions of Sherman Pew that the sense of isolation is best represented in this novel. With the exception of his cold, blue eyes, he looked like any other Negro boy. But even this slight physical abnormality increased his alienation. He is obsessed by the desire to "do something, do something, do something" (p. 214). He feels that if he could only act, he would be able to escape from the prison of loneliness. Finally, he does act, but his action is terrifyingly grotesque. One day Sherman "deliberately... picked up a clothesline, made a noose of it, and hanged the dog [Jester's] on an elm branch" (p. 216). Later Jester demands an explanation, and in Sherman's answer is the affirmation of his pain and hurt:

"Why don't nobody care about me? I do things, don't nobody notice. Good or mean, nobody notices. People pet that god-damned dog more than they notice me. And it's just a dog" (p. 216).

Sherman represents youth in its fierce search for identity. He has recognized the horror of each person's separateness, and he cries out against the loneliness of his knowledge.

Reflections in a Golden Eye presents bizarre reflections of "a kind of spiritual intuition of something almost too incredible and shocking to talk about...."⁶ says Tennessee Williams in his introduction to this book. Reflected in an unwavering mirror which is symbolized by the peacock's grotesque golden eye, are "the grotesque aberrations of the characters involved...."⁷ The characters in this novel are a woman who uses garden shears to mutilate her breasts, a Filipino houseboy, companion to the mutilated woman and creator of grotesque water-color pictures, a strange, silent soldier who rides horseback naked, an Army Captain who has an unnatural attachment to the soldier, the Captain's promiscuous wife who is a little feeble-minded, and a major, the lover of the Captain's wife and the husband of the mutilated woman.

⁶Williams, p. xiii.

⁷Hassan, p. 318.

These warped characters are dominated by situations which cause frustration and suffering. Alison Langdon continues to grieve for her dead child who was born with its index and third fingers grown together. While the child's deformed condition strengthened Alison's love and compassion for the child, her husband could only feel "that if he had to touch that baby he would shudder all over" (p. 31). Anacleto, living in a world of child-like fantasy, feels that "the Lord had blundered grossly in the making of everyone except himself and Madame Alison--- the sole exceptions to this were people behind footlights, midgets, great artists, and such like fabulous folk" (p. 33). He is another of McCullers' characters who finds himself drawn to the deviate.

Captain Penderton---a homosexual, a sadist, and a kleptomaniac---epitomizes the abnormal. Somewhat like Biff Brannon, Captain Penderton "obtained within himself a delicate balance between the male and the female elements, with the susceptibilities of both the sexes and the active powers of neither" (p. 8). Because of this sexual ambivalence, "he had a sad penchant for becoming enamored of his wife's lovers" (p. 8). This explains in part his strange attachment to Major Langdon and Private Williams.

Although the Captain had a tendency to kleptomania, he succumbed to his weakness only twice. Once when he was a child he had taken a hair-receiver as a love-gift for a "school-yard bully" (p. 41). Not until many years

later was he again unable to resist the temptation. This time he took a dessert spoon at a dinner party simply because he had become charmed by it.

Characteristic of Captain Penderton, too, are his sadistic and masochistic tendencies. Caught up in a life of frustration and despair, he often released his anxieties by inflicting pain upon others and himself. Coming upon a small kitten one winter night, the Captain picked up the kitten, caressed it for a while, and then squeezed it into a mailbox. The best example of his sadistic-masochistic disposition is his mad ride through the forest on Firebird, his wife's horse. The Captain's actions were especially strange because, in actuality, he was afraid of horses and in particular this horse. He rode Firebird because it was one way that he could torment himself. McCullers tells us that "this sort of behavior was not new to the Captain. Often in his life he had exalted many strange and secret little penances on himself which he would have found difficult to explain to others" (p. 57). After the ride in which Penderton drove Firebird to the point of exhaustion, he tied the horse to a tree and beat him with savage blows. But even breaking the horse did not appease the Captain's frustration. On the point of exhaustion, he appears to be broken in spirit himself. McCullers says:

He sank down on the ground and lay in a curious position with

his head in his arms. Out in the forest, there, the Captain looked like a broken doll that has been thrown away. He was sobbing aloud (p. 61).

This episode in the Captain's life involves a combination of shame and rapture, pleasure and pain, and blindness and vision.

Like the actions of Captain Penderton, the grotesque actions of Private Williams are a manifestation of his isolation and loneliness. His unnatural behavior is an indication of his deeply disturbed state of mind. Late one evening, after completing a gardening job for the Captain, Private Williams had by chance seen Leonora Penderton ascend the stairs in the nude. Since Williams' childhood had been spent in an entirely male environment, this was the first time he had ever seen a naked woman. In fact, he "had never willingly touched, or looked at, or spoken to a female since he was eight years old" (p. 16). But this visual experience had a profound influence on the soldier. From that particular night, he returned every evening to observe what went on inside Captain Penderton's house. After a time he began to enter the house and to sit silently by the bedside of Mrs. Penderton as she slept. McCullers says of his strange actions:

In the reconnoiterings, and during the dark vigils in the Lady's room, the soldier had no fear. He felt, but did not think; he experienced without making any mental resume of his present or past actions (p. 79).

During these secret vigils by the bedside of Mrs. Pender-ton, Private Williams was aware of a sudden happiness which he had experienced only on several occasions in his life. The other distinct occasion for this same pleasurable sensation was a ride in the nude on a bare-backed horse. The following forest scene reveals the most bizarre aspect of his nature:

When he could get leave from work in the afternoon, he took a certain horse from the stable with him. He rode about five miles from the post to a secluded spot, far from any paths.... In this lonely place the soldier always unsaddled his horse and let him go free. Then he took off his clothes and lay down on a huge rock in the middle of the field. For there was one thing that this soldier could not do without---the sun. Sometimes, still naked, he stood on the rock and slipped upon the horse's bare back.... As he cantered about in the sunlight, there was a sensual, savage smile on his lips that would have surprised his barrack mates. After such outings he came back weary to the stables and spoke to no one (p. 46-47).

Although the soldier experiences the same kind of happiness from both the bed-side vigils and the sensual experience in the forest, he is not able to reason or to act upon either. It is his inability to act that reveals the horror of the inescapable prison of isolation in which he lives. McCullers comments that "the mind of Private Williams was imbued with various colors of strange tones, but it was without delineation, void of form" (p. 79).

The characters in Reflections in a Golden Eye inhabit a world of violence and desperation. In their efforts to overcome alienation and loneliness, each one finds that no salvation is possible. Although the dreadful existence of each character is recognized symbolically in the reflective eye of the peacock, the characters themselves are not able to recognize the basis of their tragic condition. Not only are they unable to communicate their understanding; they cannot even understand. Thus, in this novel, no relation can relieve the pain and terror caused by the isolation which life itself imposes. Hassan comments on this condition:

All relations fail: the relation of man to man and man to woman, of man to environment and woman to child. All communication is blocked, vitiated, or restricted to the inarticulate moment which witnesses Private Williams riding a horse naked in the sun or watching Leonora sleep in a dark room.⁸

Thus, all human effort to escape loneliness had been in vain.

This dark truth of man's existence finds expression again in the characters of "The Ballad of the Sad Café." This novelette is a tour de force of grotesquerie, suggesting through its symbolism that the struggle of any human soul to overcome loneliness and to belong is a futile one. Indeed, it is in this work that McCullers uses the

⁸Hassan, p. 319.

grotesque most effectively. In "The Ballad of the Sad Café," there are two major characters, deformed both physically and psychologically, who are unbelievably bizarre: Amelia, cross-eyed, over six feet tall with muscles and bones like a man, a sexless being, and Cousin Lymon, an ageless dwarf, who is four feet tall with hands that resemble sparrow claws. Although he is Amelia's love-object, he is at the same time emotionally and perversely attached to Amelia's ex-convict husband, Marvin Macy.

At the beginning of the novelette, McCullers describes the dreary town in which these characters live as "lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world" (p. 3). In the center of this desolate town stands Amelia's café where most of the action in the novel takes place. Important to the atmosphere of the novelette is the exterior appearance of this café. The café, like the town itself, is described early in the story. McCullers says:

The largest building, in the very center of the town, is boarded up completely and leans so far to the right that it seems bound to collapse at any minute. The house is very old. There is about it a curious, cracked look that is very puzzling until you suddenly realize that at one time, long ago, the right side of the front porch had been painted, and part of the wall--- but the painting was left unfinished and one portion of the house is darker and dingier than the other (p. 3).

The café is originally established to provide Lymon with company and entertainment, because at night he is sickly

and afraid of death. It is in this café that the whole town, as well as cousin Lymon, seeks in some way to escape from the loneliness of their existence.

A complicated lover-beloved relationship constitutes the basic pattern of the book, and in this strange involvement the characters of Marvin Macy, Cousin Lymon, and Amelia Evans are inter-related. The first lover-beloved relationship is based on the marriage of Marvin Macy and Amelia, which takes place before Cousin Lymon comes into Amelia's life. Amelia's marriage is viewed by the town as a "grotesque affair" (p. 34). Although Macy is a very handsome man, he chooses Amelia, "a solitary, gangling, queer-eyed girl" (p. 28). Amelia marries him, but their marriage is never consummated. After ten days, Amelia forces Macy to leave her. Although he gives her love and all of his possessions, Amelia cannot accept him. Her indifference to him is heightened by the fact that she never mentions his name, but refers to him instead as "'that loom-fixer I was married to'" (p. 33).

From the time Cousin Lymon arrives in town, Amelia's actions become progressively grotesque. She accepts him immediately, and a grotesque attachment develops between them. The following scene describes their relationship:

...Miss Amelia rubbed [Lymon] night and morning with pot liquor to give him strength. She spoiled him to a point beyond reason, but nothing seemed to strengthen him; food only made his hump and his head grow larger while the rest of him remained

weakly and deformed. Miss Amelia was the same in appearance. During the week she still wore swamp boots and overalls, but on Sunday she put on a dark red dress that hung on her in a most peculiar fashion. Her manners, however, and her way of life were greatly changed. She still loved a fierce law-suit, but she was not so quick to cheat her fellow man and to exact cruel payments. Because the hunchback was so extremely sociable, she even went about a little--- to revivals, funerals, and so forth.... (p. 24).

Ironically, Amelia is changed in much the same way as was Marvin Macy by his love for her. Like him, Amelia has become a lover.

When Marvin Macy returns to the town, the lover-beloved interchange is again set in motion. But this time Macy is the beloved rather than the lover. As soon as Cousin Lymon sees Macy, he rejects Amelia's attentions and turns all of his energies toward Macy. Having forsaken Amelia, Lymon begins to make fun of her. McCullers says: "He crossed his eyes and aped her gestures in a way that made her appear to be a freak" (p. 62). His actions toward Macy are equally grotesque. They are described as follows:

Cousin Lymon had a very peculiar accomplishment, which he used whenever he wished to ingratiate himself with someone. He could stand very still, and with just a little concentration, he could wiggle his large pale ears with marvelous quickness and ease. This trick he always used when he wanted to get something special out of Amelia, and to her it was irresistible. Now as he stood

there the hunchback's ears were wiggling furiously on his head, but it was not Miss Amelia at whom he was looking this time. The hunchback was smiling at Marvin Macy with an entreaty that was near to desperation. At first Marvin Macy paid no attention to him, and when he did finally glance at the hunchback it was without any appreciation whatsoever (p. 49).

Marvin Macy's only response is: "'What ails this Broke-back?'" (p. 49). The complex love involvement is now complete. Macy loves Amelia; Amelia loves Lymon; and Lymon loves Macy. All have love-objects; all are the beloved; all are lovers. Yet, each is alone and isolated. There is no reciprocal relationship in their love; and unless this kind of mutual communion exists, love can only become as Hassan observes, a "crazy whirligig."⁹

In "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe," each character, having met with denial, is in turn deformed emotionally. For these characters, there is no liberation from their isolation and loneliness. At the end of the novelette, the tragedy of their estrangement is symbolized in the solitary figure of Amelia. She is described as follows:

Her face lengthened, and the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are when they go crazy.... Her voice had lost its old vigor; there was none of the ring of vengeance it used to have when she would mention 'that loom-fixer I was married to,' or some other enemy. Her voice was broken, soft, and sad as the wheezy

⁹Hassan, p. 314.

whine of the church pump-organ.

For three years she sat out on the front steps every night, alone and silent, looking down the road and waiting. But the hunchback never returned.... It was in the fourth year that Miss Amelia hired a Cheehaw carpenter and had him board up the premises, and there in those closed rooms she had remained ever since (p. 70).

Thus, the cycle of isolation ends as it began, with an old distorted building inhabited by Amelia, a grotesque, sad, and solitary figure.

The scope of "The Ballad of the Sad Cafe," as well as that of McCullers' novels, testifies to the completeness of her vision of the tragic isolation of man. In its broader outlines, this theme remains constant from book to book. The grotesquerie is simply the mirror in which the quest of the lonely hunter is reflected. It is the particular medium in which each vision of isolation, each lonely individual, and each clustered group of persons and places and objects is envisioned.

McCullers uses varying elements of the grotesque to project particular facets of human loneliness and spiritual isolation. Sexual maladjustment, especially of a homosexual or bi-sexual nature is evidenced in each of her novels. Because McCullers' unique treatment of this matter is more heart-directed than clinically-directed, its grotesque nature is not repulsive. Into such a category would fall Biff Brannon, Captain Penderton, Singer, and Cousin Lymon. Alison Langdon and Jake Blount represent a group marked by self-mutilation as a symbolic

manifestation of inner, psychological mutilation. The near grotesque nature of adolescence is clearly shown in Mick Kelly, Frankie Addams, and Jester Clane. Amelia and Lymon typify alienation through their natural physical deformity. The isolation of the Negro race, coupled with the usual individual isolation is seen in Dr. Copeland, Bernice Sadie Brown, and Sherman Pew, all of whom possess some traits of the grotesque. These categories are not, however, exclusive or limited. For example, all the characters who are sexually maladjusted are also psychologically mutilated.

In commenting on McCullers' use of the grotesque to amplify her tragic vision of life, William P. Clancey makes the following critical observation:

Behind the strange and horrible in her world there are played out the most sombre tragedies of the human spirit; her mutes, her hunchbacks, speak of complexities and frustrations which are so native to man that they can only be recognized, perhaps, in the shock which comes from seeing them dressed in the robes of the grotesque.¹⁰

What Clancey has said is certainly true. For finally, it is Carson McCullers' ability to artistically magnify through the grotesque the tragedy of man's spiritual isolation and human loneliness that demands for her an important place in twentieth century American literature.

¹⁰William P. Clancey, Commonweal, LIX (1951), 243.

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