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The fiction of Carson McCullers depicts a distinct, unique world characterized by its emphasis on the bizarre and grotesque. It is a world inhabited by freaks and outcasts whose experiences, removed from the realm of the ordinary, are violent, abrupt, and terrible. Her heroes, unacceptable and alienated by their freakishness, live in a world made unendurably lonely by the failure of love and communication. The horrible spiritual isolation inevitable in a world where love fails and dialogue ends in frustration is one of Carson McCullers' favorite themes, and she persistently develops it in all her writing. It is the nature of this theme that governs her choice of the unusual and grotesque. Throughout all her work Carson McCullers, trying to teach about the nature of love and the attendant loneliness and pain, depends extensively on the use of symbolism. It is because the expression of her major themes is predominantly symbolic that the freaks and outcasts and their experiences have a meaning beyond the realistic, narrative level of the novel.

This thesis has been approved by the following
committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The
University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

by

Dorothy Jean Kirk

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Approved by

Donald G. Darrell
Thesis Adviser

January 15, 1969
Janice M. Reynolds

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following
committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The
University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis
Adviser

Donald G. Darrell

Oral Examination
Committee Members

Donald G. Darrell

Edward W. Craft, III

Robert C. Stephens

James J. Winkler

January 10, 1969
Date of Examination

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background complete it by providing it with a sincere but realistic foundation. Although certain aspects of the South are strange and unusual, they are not entirely unfamiliar. For example, at the time the novels take place, the South is a technologically impoverished area supported largely by the textile industry. The towns in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, *The Member of the Wedding*, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, and *Black Widows* were all Southern mill towns with the entire portion of the population employed by the mills. Most of the inhabitants of these towns are poor and uneducated, with no concept of life outside their small communities.

There is also a substantial Negro population which has long been denied its freedom. Although the racial incidents in Carson McCullers' novels are realistic, the author uses them to create the impression of a violent, grotesque world.

In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* white prison guards leave

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CHAPTER I

THE WORLD

Carson McCullers creates an abnormal world set within the region of the deep South. Rather than conflicting with Mrs. McCullers' world, the South's unique social and economic background completes it by providing it with a bizarre but realistic foundation. Although certain aspects of the South are strange and unusual, they are not entirely unfamiliar. For example, at the time the novels take place, the South is an economically impoverished area supported largely by the textile industry. The towns in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, The Member of the Wedding, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, and Clock without Hands are all Southern mill towns with the major portion of the population employed by the mills. Most of the inhabitants of these towns are poor and uneducated, with no concept of life outside their small communities.

There is also a substantial Negro population which has long been denied its freedom. Although the racial incidents in Carson McCullers' novels are realistic, the author uses them to create the impression of a violent, grotesque world. In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter white prison guards leave

Dr. Copeland's son Willie chained in a freezing room until his legs must be amputated. When Dr. Copeland visits the courthouse seeking justice for his son, the deputy sheriff aided by several others beats him severely and throws him in jail. In Clock without Hands an indignant group of white citizens murder the Negro Sherman Pew when he moves into a white residential section of the town. These incidents along with the others of racial violence are horrible and grotesque but are not completely surprising since they are associated with the real South. They do indicate, however, that a society which supports such prejudice is dangerously diseased and unsound.

Another feature of Southern life augmenting the peculiarity of Carson McCuller's world is a pervading sense of lethargy and monotony. Writers commonly portray the Southern world as moving and changing gradually. This is especially true of Mrs. McCuller's world where for years things happen just as they have always happened. Change passes unnoticed until the day of its completion. Then, because of its gradual movement, it seems to have come suddenly and without warning. In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, the narrator describes Singer's and Antonapoulos's life together in a way that underscores its unvarying routine. Because their present is indistinguishable from their past, their world

displays a certain timelessness:

The two mutes had no other friends, and except when they worked they were alone together. Each day was very much like another day, because they were alone so much that nothing ever disturbed them.¹

This same lack of change distresses the heroine, Frankie Adams, in The Member of the Wedding. Every day is just like the day before it, with Berenice, Frankie, and John Henry acting out the same daily drama. The invariable weather only adds to the monotony they experience. The days, all long, dry, and glaring, merge into one interminable day for Frankie: "Each day was like the day before, except that it was longer, and nothing hurt her any more."²

In The Ballad of the Sad Cafe a tone of boredom and monotony dominates the entire novel. The only sure change is death and decay, symbolized by the large dilapidated building in the center of town. Although the action takes place over a period close to ten years, only two major changes take place--the arrival of Cousin Lymon, which marks the birth of the cafe, and the return of Marvin Macy, which

¹Carson McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe: The Novels and Stories of Carson McCullers (Boston, 1951), p. 147.

²McCullers, The Member of the Wedding in The Ballad, p. 627.

eventually leads to its destruction. Between these two events, the years pass slowly with an imperceptible change:

Now time must pass. For the next four years are much alike. There are great changes, but these changes are brought about bit by bit, in simple steps which in themselves do not appear to be important.³

Some of the strangeness of Mrs. McCullers' world can be attributed to the Southern setting, but the grotesqueness goes much beyond this. The religious environment, for instance, is bizarre and abnormal in ways not characteristic of the South. Its most obvious peculiarity is the absence of a strong belief in God coupled with the failure of the Christian religion. Except for a few background characters, most of the inhabitants are indifferent to the question of God's existence while several characters strongly deny it. In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter Jake Blount and Dr. Copeland are both adamant atheists. Dr. Copeland sees Christianity blocking the Negro's path to freedom and dignity. Religion, as much as society, suppresses Copeland's people because they depend on a miracle from God rather than on their own initiative and hard work to free them. Dr. Copeland's father-in-law reveals this dependence at a family gathering:

I reason I will get to stand before Jesus with all my childrens and grandchildren and great

³McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe in The Ballad, p. 22.

grandchildrens and kinfolks and friends and I say to Him, 'Jesus Christ, us is all sad colored peoples.' And then he will place His holy hand upon our heads and straightway us will be white as cotton.⁴

Jake Blount, another character who views religion with contempt, was once a fanatical Christian. Before discovering socialism, Blount wanted to be an evangelist. Now he shows his contempt for Christianity by abusing the almost insane Simms who tries to convert him. Nevertheless, like many socialists, he does not scorn Jesus Christ, whom he believes was one of the few who recognized the validity of socialism:

Take Jesus. He was one of us. He knew. When he said that it is harder for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God--he damn well meant just what he said.⁵

In Carson McCullers' last novel, Clock without Hands, Christianity fails completely. It becomes a meaningless crutch men exploit for social reasons. The hero, J. T. Malone, evaluates the church's authority by the financial and social status of its members. In his eyes, the more influential the church member, the more valid the church's doctrines. Because of its shallow base, his religion fails

⁴McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in The Ballad, p. 287.

⁵Ibid., p. 298.

to provide him with comfort when he is deeply troubled by his approaching death. The failure of Christianity is most apparent when Malone questions his minister about the possibility of an afterlife. To Malone's questions about death, the man can only respond with trite, empty statements: "We all have to die" or eternal life "is the extension of earthly life, but more intensified."⁶

The absence of a belief in God forms a void many characters fill with their own personal gods. This is especially true in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter where the characters worship their human gods as ardently as they would a heavenly one. The relationship between Singer and the other characters exhibits this need to identify with something outside oneself. The characters must worship something even if it turns out to be another person. Mick, Blount, and Copeland all revolve around Singer because they convince themselves that he is wise, knowing and compassionate, qualities usually attributed to a divine being. Unable to reveal his personality through speech, he is pliable enough to be moulded to their own individual desires.⁷ Mick believes

⁶Carson McCullers, Clock without Hands (Boston, 1961), p. 156.

⁷Chester Eisinger, Fiction of the Forties (Chicago, 1963), p. 247.

Singer understands and shares her passionate love of music. Although she does not believe in God, "When she thought of what she used to imagine was God she could only see Mister Singer with a long, white sheet around him."⁸

Similarly, Blount and Copeland envision him as one of the few who comprehends the teachings of Karl Marx. They engage in long, one-sided conversations with Singer, who does not understand their discussions any more than he understands Mick's love of music. Unable to respond verbally or disclose what he is told, he becomes a father confessor for Mick, Copeland, and Blount.⁹ The only person aware of this situation is Biff Brannon, who thinks:

How Singer had been before was not important. The thing that mattered was the way Blount and Mick made of him a sort of home-made God. Owing to the fact he was a mute they were able to give him all the qualities they wanted him to have.¹⁰

A victim of the same sinister trap, Singer fails his followers. His involvement with the Greek is analogous to

⁸ McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in The Ballad, p. 261.

⁹ Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence. The Contemporary American Novel (Princeton, 1961), p. 211.

¹⁰ McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in The Ballad, pp. 371-372.

their dependence on him. Singer's personal god, Antonapoulos, seems to him like an Oriental deity who is omniscient and wise. Singer confides in Antonapoulos in the same manner that the other characters confide in him. When the two mutes are together, Singer talks with his hands until he is exhausted. Antonapoulos is Singer's unknowable confessor.

A chain of worshippers exists with Singer occupying the center position. Mick, Blount, and Copeland worship Singer. Singer worships Antonapoulos, who in turn worships his own personal god. Wayne D. Dodd explains the meaning of this relationship between man and the god he creates in response to his own personal desires and needs:

The implication is that this is an unending process: one is not in communication with one omnipotent god, but rather with an infinite series of limited gods, each of whom is as dependent on another as those who worship him.¹¹

Another disturbing aspect of the religious environment is that creation is presented as being imperfect and incomplete. It is as if the creator, losing interest, abandoned his creation before its completion. This idea dominates The Member of the Wedding, where its most obvious expression can be found in the kitchen discussions of Berenice, Frankie,

¹¹Wayne D. Dodd, "The Development of Theme through Symbol in the Novels of Carson McCullers," Georgia Review, XVII (1963), 207.

and John Henry. Dissatisfied with God's creation, they discuss how they would improve it. As the characters in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter mould their gods according to their needs, John Henry, Berenice, and Frankie want to alter the world to fit their own personalities. In their ideal worlds, their abnormalities disappear. Since Berenice's color isolates her, her world is a just one without color distinctions. Everyone would be "light brown color with blue eyes and black hair."¹²

Similarly, since Frankie feels out of place because she is as much like a boy as a young girl, her world settles the question of her sexuality. Her tomboyishness would no longer isolate her: "She planned it so that people could instantly change back and forth from boys to girls, whichever way they felt like and wanted."¹³

John Henry's world reflects his childlike desires. Because it departs the most from reality, it is the most freakish of the ideal worlds:

. . . the sudden long arm that could stretch from here to California, chocolate dirt and rains of lemonade, the extra eye seeing a thousand miles, a hinged

¹²McCullers, The Member of the Wedding in The Ballad, p. 712.

¹³Ibid., p. 714.

tail that could be let down as a kind of prop to sit on when you wished to rest, the candy flowers.¹⁴

This concept of the incompleteness and grotesqueness of creation repeats itself in several minor incidents involving Frankie Adams.¹⁵ The most obvious is the piano tuning that interrupts the long Saturday afternoon before the wedding. The piano tuner never completes the scale, but he always stops one note short. A similar incident happens the night Frankie tries to convince John Henry to spend the night with her. A distant jazz trumpet attracts her attention, but as she stands there entranced, it suddenly stops, leaving her shocked and lost.

The grotesqueness of creation exhibits itself most clearly in the characters inhabiting this world. Ill-equipped for life, they seem to be mistakes of the creator. Several examples are Singer, the deaf mute, Cousin Lymon, the hunchback, and Weldon Penderton, the sexually ambiguous Army Captain. In The Member of the Wedding, Honey Brown embodies the idea that God's creation is still unfinished.¹⁶ He feels restless, discontented, and trapped. Big Mamma,

¹⁴McCullers, The Member of the Wedding in The Ballad, p. 712.

¹⁵Dodd, Georgia Review, XVII, 210.

¹⁶Dodd, Georgia Review, XVII, 210.

discerning the reason for this, blames God:

She said he was a boy God had not finished. The Creator had withdrawn His hand from him too soon. God had not finished him, and so he had to go around doing one thing and then another to finish himself up.¹⁷

This same idea is touched upon in Reflections in a Golden Eye when the narrator mentions Anacleto's belief that God made a mistake in creating everyone except himself and Alison Langdon. Also illustrating this theme are Cousin Lymon's half-finished painting of the cafe in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe and the deck of cards with the jacks and queens missing in The Member of the Wedding.¹⁸

Partially accounting for the incompleteness of creation is the substitution of the child for the adult in the role of artist or creator.¹⁹ Most of the children in Mrs. McCullers' fiction are artistic while the adults are sterile and unimaginative. The children are usually painters and musicians, but the grotesque nature of their art is disturbing. Mick Kelly, the young composer in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, paints violent, frightening pictures. Her subjects range from the

¹⁷ McCullers, The Member of the Wedding in The Ballad, p. 750.

¹⁸ Dodd, Georgia Review, XVII, 210.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 209.

destruction of planes and ships by ocean storms to a fire which rages through town leaving dozens of people dead on the streets. The people in her paintings are usually malformed: "the people didn't have any fingers and some of the arms were longer than the legs."²⁰

Mick's paintings resemble Anacleto's in Reflections in a Golden Eye and John Henry's in The Member of the Wedding. Anacleto's art is described as being "at once primitive and over-sophisticated."²¹ Although John Henry is serious and deliberate about his drawings, they turn out freakish and bizarre.

The significance of the child assuming the role of artist and creator is that he is the only one who really sees the grotesqueness of his surroundings. The role of the child artist also implies that the world itself may be the creation of an immature being. God may resemble the child to whom art is an experiment or game that creates a grotesque world inhabited by freaks and misfits.²² This

²⁰McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in The Ballad, p. 186.

²¹McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye in The Ballad, p. 563.

²²Dodd, Georgia Review, XVII, 209.

condition results in a religious environment in which the lack of the traditional beliefs in God and the failure of the Christian religion foster the attitude that Creation is unnatural and incomplete.

Not only is religion dead and meaningless, but society is diseased and unsound. Motivated by the greed and hate of its individual members rather than by the desire to better itself, society becomes a menace. Whenever the townspeople act collectively, they appear ugly and loathsome. In The Ballad of the Sad Cafe the townspeople propagate an evil rumor about Miss Amelia and the fate of the hunchback. Unrestrained by rational thought, it grows until all but the "three good people"²³ in town believe that Miss Amelia murdered the hunchback. The men that gather that night to confront Miss Amelia represent the town. They all believe Miss Amelia to be guilty of an atrocious crime. Oliver Evans observes that they are ordinary citizens who acting as a group give a single impression of ugliness and stupidity.²⁴ The narrator describes the men as looking "very much alike-- all wearing blue overalls, most of them with whitish hair,

²³McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe in The Ballad, p. 13.

²⁴Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York, 1965), p. 133.

all pale of face, and all with a set, dreaming look in the eye."²⁵

A similar incident occurs in Clock without Hands when several citizens meet in Malone's pharmacy to conspire against the Negro Sherman Pew. The group is held together only by its hatred for the Negro race. The descriptions of the participants and their personal lives underscore the repulsiveness of the group: Sheriff McCall, a man with "Purplish hands and a broken nose," Bennie Weems, "a weasel-faced garage man and a real liquor head,"²⁶ and Sammy Lank, a poor, pathetic mill hand who produced fourteen children in an unsuccessful attempt to have a famous set of quints.

The ugliness of society revealed through these segments directs attention to the existence of the more serious problem of society's interference in the development of its individual members. Rather than creating conditions conducive to personal growth, the structure of society prevents self-expression and fulfillment. The most notable case is the plight of the Negro, who is not permitted the use of his talents as society pushes him into a subordinate position.

²⁵McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe in The Ballad, p. 16.

²⁶McCullers, Clock, p. 224.

Mrs. McCullers probes this problem in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, The Member of the Wedding, and Clock without Hands. In these novels society denies the Negro his educational, political, and economic rights under threat of humiliation and brutality. In his annual Christmas speech, Dr. Copeland blames society:

We have no representatives in government. We have no vote. In all of this great country we are the most oppressed of all people.²⁷

In The Member of the Wedding, Berenice realizes that a predominantly white society isolates her people because of their color:

Everybody is caught one way or another. But they done drawn completely extra bounds around all colored people. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself.²⁸

Society may isolate the Negro race as a group and hinder its progress, but it also restricts the self-expression of its other members. Mick Kelly, forced to leave high school, gives up all hope of ever developing her musical talents. She realizes that society is at fault rather than any single individual:

²⁷McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in The Ballad, p. 333.

²⁸McCullers, The Member of the Wedding in The Ballad, p. 740.

So there was nothing to be mad at. It was like she was cheated. Only nobody cheated her. So there was nobody to take it out on.²⁹

The social structure is one of the problems facing Captain Penderton in Reflections in a Golden Eye. According to Ihab Hassan, the Army Post is the "image of social regimentation."³⁰ In emphasizing the patterned design of the army camp and the rigid life of a soldier, the opening passage substantiates Hassan's observation. Any attempt at personal fulfillment is discouraged: "once a man enters the army he is expected only to follow the heels ahead of him."³¹ Captain Penderton suffers from this regimentation because society prevents any expression of his love for the young soldier. Locked within him, his love becomes an uncontrollable hate that torments him constantly. His recognition of the situation prompts him to question the stringency of the society in which he lives:

'You mean,' Captain Penderton said, 'that any fulfillment obtained at the expense of normalcy is wrong, and should not be allowed to bring happiness. In short, it is better, because it is morally honorable,

²⁹McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in The Ballad, p. 493.

³⁰Hassan, p. 217.

³¹McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye in The Ballad, p. 502.

for the square peg to keep scraping about in the round hole rather than to discover and use the unorthodox square that would fit it?'³²

Adding to the grotesqueness of society is the absence of any kind of stable family life. Under the strain generated by the lack of understanding between its members, the family breaks down. In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter a serious conflict erupts between Dr. Copeland and his children when he attempts to make them instruments of his will to continue his struggle to free the Negro people. The bitter dissension blocks any communication between them.

Many problems of Mrs. McCullers' adolescent characters are directly related to the lack of parental guidance and understanding. Mick Kelly in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, Frankie Adams in The Member of the Wedding, and Jester Clane in Clock without Hands are all alienated from their families. Troubled by financial problems, Mick's parents are unsympathetic to her difficulties. The only adult advice and understanding she receives comes from Portia, the Negro maid who works for her parents. Frankie's situation is analogous to Mick's because her mother died when she was born and her father leaves her to the care of Berenice. Frankie's reason

³²McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye in The Ballad, p. 584.

for wanting to join her brother and his bride is that she does not feel a member of anything, not even her family. She holds a grudge against her father and sees the wedding as her one chance to belong.

In Clock without Hands Jester's detachment from his grandfather, his only real family because both his parents are dead, originates from his effort to find himself and his place in the world. The tension arises because he and the old Judge represent two different generations and two widely divergent approaches to the problems of the South. Judge Clane's ideal South lies in the past, but Jester's lies in the future and represents the realization of his and his father's dreams:

His dreams were nearly always in foreign countries. Never in Milan, never in Georgia, but always in Switzerland or Bali or someplace. But now his dreams had strangely shifted. Both night dreams and daydreams. Night after night he dreamed of his father. And having found his father he was able to find himself.³³

The family completely disintegrates in Mrs. McCullers' two novelettes, Reflections in a Golden Eye and The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. Ihab Hassan observes that in Reflections in a Golden Eye: "all relations fail: the relation of man

³³McCullers, Clock, p. 204.

to man and man to woman, of man to environment and woman to child."³⁴ The failure of the relationship between husband and wife is evident. Captain Penderton accepts with good nature his wife's adultery with Major Langdon because of his affection for the Major. The open nature of the affair combined with the Major's lack of remorse drives Alison Langdon to actual lunacy. The barrenness of these marriages--the Pendertons have no children and the Langdon's deformed child died within a year--symbolizes the failure of the family.

In The Ballad of the Sad Cafe the main characters place no value on family life but seem to consider it an unnecessary burden. They prefer a solitary life without family ties. Miss Amelia's parents are dead, and she despises her one remaining relative. Marvin Macy's family history is abnormal because his wild, animal-like parents starved, beat, and finally abandoned him and his brothers and sisters to the mercy of the town.

The family, then, is another grotesque unit in Mrs. McCullers' world. The relationships usually considered the most meaningful and sacred--the husband-wife and parent-child relationships--mean nothing in this society. As

³⁴Hassan, p. 217.

Irving Malin notes in New American Gothic, the breakdown of family life in Carson McCullers' fiction is an element of gothic fiction in which the family is a microcosm where love first fails.³⁵

The weather, while less noticeable than the religious and social environments, is equally important in the creation of Mrs. McCullers' world. Closely related to the other elements of this world, the weather seems to respond to any unexpected change in the moods or actions of the characters. The weather's most obvious characteristic--the intense heat and glare--manifests itself in the long, dry summers that turn into periods of violence and turbulence. The warmer the weather gets, the more restless and disturbed the characters become. The heat troubles Jake Blount in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter:

The warm southwest winds from the Gulf of Mexico were heavy with the smells of Spring. The days grew longer and the sun was bright. The lazy warmth depressed him. He began to drink again.³⁶

Generally, seasonal changes are accompanied by some change in the world, and unseasonal weather is a portent of

³⁵Irving Malin, New American Gothic (Carbondale, 1962), p. 8.

³⁶McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in The Ballad, p. 424.

disaster. In The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, the false start of autumn marks Marvin Macy's return to town. The day of his return coincides with the beginning of the first cold spell when Miss Amelia and others in the town butcher and barbecue the first hogs of the season. Marvin Macy's return brings unseasonably hot weather which causes the freshly slaughtered pork to spoil:

Marvin Macy brought with him bad fortune, right from the first, as could be expected. The next day the weather turned suddenly, and it became hot. . . . It was unseasonable, worse than August, and much damage was done.³⁷

The weather plays an important part in The Member of the Wedding where the monotony and apathy are blamed on the August dog days. Also, the change in the seasons from summer to fall coincides with Frankie's transition from childhood to adulthood. The summer she hated so much ends, and the approach of fall brings with it the death of John Henry and the end of her relationship with Berenice.

In Clock without Hands, J. T. Malone's sudden knowledge that he is soon to die of leukemia comes at the very beginning of spring. Malone actually believes his listlessness is merely a symptom of spring fever.

³⁷McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe in The Ballad, pp. 47-48.

The weather has a symbolic function in Mrs. McCullers' world. The most obvious and frequently used symbols are the ocean and snow that represent the foreign and strange in all Mrs. McCullers' fiction. They are symbols of freedom for Mick Kelly and Frankie Adams, who are fascinated by the prospects of one day seeing snow. Significantly, their day-dreams take place in snow covered countries. Mick dreams of the icy mountains of Switzerland, and Frankie longs to accompany her brother and his wife to Alaska.

The author uses this same symbolism in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. The first snowfall in the county that people remember takes place the winter after Marvin Macy's return. The strange, eerie event upsets everyone in town except Macy, who behaves as though he caused the phenomenon.

The weather, then accentuates the strangeness of Carson McCullers' world. The summer heat generates violence and disorder while the glare, distorting the vision of the inhabitants, increases the impression of a grotesque, malevolent environment.

The world Carson McCullers creates is abnormal in its religious and social aspects. The failure of religion and the breakdown of the family unit in combination with the economic and physical aspects of the Southern environment

contribute to the grotesque and gothic nature of Mrs. McCullers' world. The author adds to the grotesqueness of this world through her characters who appear bizarre and estranged.

The inhabitants of Mrs. McCullers' world, like their author, are grotesque and gothic. Each character is a kind of freak or misfit. In Mrs. McCullers' first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, several characters appear grotesque because of physical handicaps. Sisyphus and Mick are deaf-mutes, while another character, John Singer, has such an exaggerated physical appearance that in every glance he looks like a freak.

Similarly, John Henry in *The Member of the Wedding* has the same exaggerated features that make the last novel like a freak:

He was small to be six years old, but he had the largest nose that I could see ever seen, and on one of them there was always a bump or swelling.

Carson McCullers, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. The Member of the Wedding. The Member and Sisyphus of Carson McCullers (Boston, 1951), p. 151. "Almost was not a freak, although when you first saw him he gave you that impression. It was like something was deformed about him--but when you looked at him closely each part of him was normal and as it ought to be."

CHAPTER II

THE INHABITANTS

The inhabitants of Carson McCullers' world, like their environment, are abnormal and grotesque. Each character is in some way a freak or misfit. In Mrs. McCullers' first novel, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, several main characters appear grotesque because of physical handicaps. Singer and Antonapoulos are deaf mutes, while another character, Jake Blount, has such an exaggerated physical appearance that on first glance he looks like a freak.¹

Similarly, John Henry in The Member of the Wedding has the same exaggerated features that make him look much like a freak:

He was small to be six years old, but he had the largest knees that Frankie had ever seen, and on one of them there was always a scab or bandage

¹Carson McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe: The Novels and Stories of Carson McCullers (Boston, 1951), p. 163: "Blount was not a freak, although when you first saw him he gave you that impression. It was like something was deformed about him-- but when you looked at him closely each part of him was normal and as it ought to be."

where he had fallen down and skinned himself. John Henry had a little screwed white face and he wore tiny gold-rimmed glasses.²

Frankie, the heroine of The Member of the Wedding, is terrified that she will grow into a freak. When she goes to the county fair, she imagines that the sideshow freaks look on her as being one of them. Unless something happens to stop her growth, Frankie is certain that she will reach the phenomenal height of nine feet and be forced to join the freaks at the circus. Not yet an adult, but larger than other children, Frankie is an outsider. It troubles her that she can no longer play under the grape arbor as she did in previous summers. Oliver Evans notes that Frankie's habit of lingering around doorways and her inability to walk beneath the grape arbor symbolizes her alienation as an adolescent.³

Berenice, the adult member of the kitchen trio in The Member of the Wedding, is also physically imperfect. Her natural brown eye and artificial blue eye give her an odd, disturbing countenance. Because Berenice lost her eye

²McCullers, The Member of the Wedding in The Ballad, p. 602.

³Oliver Evans, "The Theme of Spiritual Isolation in Carson McCullers," South: Modern Spiritual Literature in Its Cultural Setting, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. & Robert D. Jacobs (Garden City, 1961), p. 338.

in a fight with one of her husbands, her blue eye is a reminder of the violence that accompanies the failure of the family relationships in this world.

Like Berenice, Sherman Pew, the Negro boy in Clock without Hands, is conspicuous because of his blue eyes:

Except for his eyes, he looked like any colored boy. But his eyes were bluish-gray, and set in the dark face they had a bleak, violent look. Once those eyes were seen, the rest of the body seemed also unusual and out of proportion.⁴

Scorned by the white race and unaccepted by his own, Sherman's blue eyes symbolize his alienation.

The three main characters in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe are also grotesque. Cousin Lymon is a hunchback who acts like a child but looks like a wizened old man. The descriptions of him stress his repulsive appearance:

His crooked little legs seemed too thin to carry the weight of his great warped chest and the hump that sat on his shoulders. He had a very large head, with deep-set blue eyes and a sharp little mouth.⁵

Although not physically deformed, Miss Amelia is regarded as a freak by the townspeople in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. Like many other female characters in Mrs.

⁴Carson McCullers, Clock without Hands (Boston, 1961), p. 9.

⁵McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe in The Ballad, p. 6.

McCullers' fiction, Miss Amelia appears strange because of her unfeminine size. While still very young, she grew to the height of six feet and two inches.

The townspeople also regard Marvin Macy as strange and abnormal because of his inability to sweat in the tightest situation or the hottest weather:

Any number of wicked things could be listed against him, but quite apart from these crimes there was about him a secret meanness that clung to him almost like a smell. Another thing--he never sweated, not even in August, and that surely is a sign worth pondering over.⁶

The adolescent inhabitants of Mrs. McCullers' world are grotesque because of a physical incompleteness or sexual ambiguity. They possess within themselves the qualities of both sexes. Although they struggle to find their sexual identities, they usually have unsuccessful or indecisive sexual experiences that leave them more bewildered about their status.⁷ Mick, the adolescent heroine of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, looks as much like a boy as a girl. Her hair is cut short and, when she is not in school, she

⁶McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe in The Ballad, p. 48.

⁷Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence. The Contemporary American Novel (Princeton, 1961), p. 220.

dresses like a boy. Interested in many of the things that interest the boys her age, she is much closer to her brothers than she is to her two older sisters. Rather than enroll in the stenographic course in school like Etta and Hazel, Mick takes mechanical shop with the boys. It is not surprising that her first sexual experience with Harry Minowitz, the boy next door, fails to clarify her feminine role. It is such a distasteful experience for both Mick and Harry that they vow they will never marry.

In The Member of the Wedding, Frankie Adams is a tom-boy with the same ambivalent attitudes toward sex as Mick. Totally ignorant of sexual behavior, Frankie views sex with horror. Before her encounter with the soldier in the Blue Moon, her dim knowledge of the existence of sex came through her "secret sin" with Barney MacKean, her accidental witnessing of Mr. Marlowe's strange fit in the rented front room, and some talk from the older girls in the neighborhood.⁸ Although her violent experience with the soldier demands an awareness of sex, it does not lessen its repulsiveness.

In Clock without Hands Jester Clane is as confused about his sexual identity as his female counterparts. A

⁸Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York, 1965), p. 113.

fair boy with delicate, feminine features, he appears to be different from the other boys in the town:

It was Jester who was a 'stranger'--he had never been like a Milan boy. He was arrogant and at the same time overpolite. There was something hidden about the boy and his softness, his brightness seemed somehow dangerous--it was as though he resembled a silk-sheathed knife.⁹

His physical attraction to Ted Hopkins and Sherman Pew as well as his disdain of women causes him to question his masculinity. Jester believes his grandfather when he accuses him of having no passion. Nevertheless, Jester becomes passionate in his love and desire for Sherman Pew. Since his passion must have a natural outlet, he expresses his love for Sherman through his experience with the prostitute who previously repelled and frightened him. While he makes love to her, she becomes Sherman in his imagination: "He closed his eyes, and having in mind a dark face and blue flickering eyes, he was able to become a man."¹⁰

In evaluating the role of the adolescent in Mrs. McCullers' fiction, Oliver Evans concludes that the adolescent is a symbol of isolation because he does not belong to the adult world in which he lives.¹¹ Similarly, Ihab

⁹McCullers, Clock, p. 23.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 84.

¹¹Evans, "The Theme of Spiritual Isolation . . .," p. 338.

Hassan believes that the adolescent, like the freak, symbolizes the outsider because of his physical and sexual incompleteness.¹² Leslie Fiedler goes further in stating that the homosexual, presented through the character of the adolescent girl, symbolizes the alienated.¹³

The adolescents are not the only ones in this world with androgynous personalities; the adults are often uncertain of their sexual identities. Biff Brannon is feminine in his maternal feelings for Mick and Baby, and after his wife dies, he begins using her cosmetics. His meditative temperament enables him to recognize these traits in himself and others.

In Reflections in a Golden Eye, Captain Penderton has homosexual feelings for his wife's lovers and Private Williams. He is also feminine in his passivity and vulnerability to life:

Sexually the Captain obtained within himself a delicate balance between the male and female elements, with the susceptibilities of both the sexes and the active powers of neither.¹⁴

¹²Hassan, p. 208.

¹³Leslie Fiedler, Waiting for the End (New York, 1964), p. 105.

¹⁴McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye in The Ballad, p. 508.

Penderton's relationship with his wife is an asexual one. After four nights he tried to consummate their marriage, but he changed his wife's virginal status only "enough to leave her somewhat puzzled."¹⁵

An abnormal fear of women obsesses Private Williams, the young soldier the Captain loves. His father taught him that any contact with them was dangerous because they carried "a deadly and catching disease which made men blind, crippled, and doomed to hell."¹⁶ This fear blocks any natural expression of his sexuality and attributes to his strong, physical attachment to the horses on the Army Post. Williams derives a perverse sexual pleasure out of riding nude through the woods surrounding the camp. His bizarre relationship with the horses suggest his physical nature. In addition, the descriptions of Williams liken him to an animal. He is described as having "Dumb, luminous eyes"¹⁷ in which "there was a mute expression that is found usually in the eyes of animals."¹⁸ Like an animal, Williams relies on his

¹⁵Ibid., p. 512.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 514.

¹⁷McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye in The Ballad, p. 516.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 567.

instincts rather than his reasoning powers: "He felt, but did not think; he experienced without making any mental resume of his present or past actions."¹⁹

In The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, the reversal of the normal sexual roles creates tension between the characters. Miss Amelia is portrayed as a masculine woman who tramps around the swamp tending her still while wearing high boots and overalls, and carrying a shotgun. Although Marvin Macy loved and married her, he failed in his attempts to consummate their marriage. Miss Amelia meets his advances with anger and violence. Finally, after ten days, Miss Amelia becomes so disgusted that she ends the marriage by throwing Marvin Macy out of the house. After many years, Miss Amelia comes to love Cousin Lymon, but her love for him is asexual.

Mrs. McCullers' world, then, is abnormal and distorted. Not only does she create a world bizarre in its physical, social, and religious aspects, but she fills it with freaks and misfits incapable of coping with their environment.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 567.

CHAPTER III

THE SYMBOLIC WORLD

The previous two chapters examined in detail two aspects of Carson McCullers' world--setting and character--and described its deviation from the real world. It becomes necessary to look beyond the abnormal and grotesque elements in Carson McCullers' fiction to the symbolic nature of her art, her particular choice of theme, the grotesque genre, and the Gothic tradition. As Ihab Hassan recognizes:

To say that Mrs. McCullers has a gothic penchant is but to note, and to note superficially, her interest in the grotesque, the freakish and the incongruous.¹

Carson McCullers' world is composed of two levels--the symbolic and the narrative. The narrative level is the product of character, action, and setting. On the symbolic level, these three components take on deeper significance as they become the metaphors Mrs. McCullers uses to express less visible, more horrifying imperfections. Flannery O'Connor's comment that the writer of grotesque fiction seeks "one image

¹Ihab Hassan, Radical Innocence. The Contemporary American Novel (Princeton, 1961), p. 207.

that will connect or combine or embody two points: one of them is the point in the concrete and the other is the point not visible to the naked eye"² is applicable to Carson McCullers' fiction. Mrs. McCullers uses setting, character, and action to express the destructive powers of loneliness and love.

The rural Southern settings express the loneliness in this world. The towns, small and isolated, are like large prisons that allow no escape and discourage newcomers by their estrangement from the rest of the world. The opening paragraph of The Ballad of the Sad Cafe introduces this feeling of remoteness:

Otherwise the town is lonesome, sad, and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world. The nearest train stop is Society City, and the Greyhound and White Bus Lines use the Fork Falls Road which is three miles away.³

The characters feel this pressure increasing their own isolation. For example, the desire to leave town and visit faraway, exciting places obsesses Frankie Adams. Speaking

²Norman Charles, "A Lecture," The Added Dimension: The Art and Mind of Flannery O'Conner, ed. Melvin J. Friedman & Lewis A. Lawson (New York, 1966), p. 274.

³Carson McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe: The Novels and Stories of Carson McCullers (Boston, 1951), p. 3.

of the life she intends to share with her brother and his wife, Frankie cries: "We will be members of the whole world."⁴

Not only do the rural, isolated Southern settings express the loneliness of Carson McCullers' world, but their stillness and monotony accentuate the grotesqueness of the rest of her world by providing a sharp contrast to the violence inherent in it.

Other grotesque features of Carson McCullers' world contributing to the theme of loneliness are the absence of a strong belief in the existence of an understanding creator and the breakdown of the family. Without a belief in a divine power, the characters are left to seek understanding from those who are spiritually incapable of giving it. Their attempts to raise another human being to the level of a God are symbolized by the strange relationships between Singer and Mick, Copeland, and Blount in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Conceivably, a character could escape this spiritual isolation through the understanding and love offered to him by his own family, but Mrs. McCullers prevents this alleviation of his isolation by creating a world where an individual's

⁴McCullers, The Member of the Wedding in The Ballad, p. 738.

private loneliness creates a tremendous gulf between himself and his family.

This gulf separating an individual and his family also isolates him from others who love him and try to communicate their love. The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is a symbolic study of this theme. Because Singer symbolizes the loneliness and frustration of both the lover whose love is rejected and the beloved who is unable to accept love, he is the symbolic center around which Mick, Blount, and Copeland revolve.⁵ Mick's love for Singer is so intense that she follows him wherever he goes. Singer, unaware of her feelings, sees her as an awkward young girl who comes to his room only to listen to his radio. Jake and Dr. Copeland love Singer for the ideal understanding and compassion they see in him. Singer remains ignorant of their love. Consequently, his suicide leaves them alone and empty.

These love relationships fail because Singer's attachment to Antonapoulos prevents him from recognizing or accepting the love that Mick, Copeland, and Blount offer. Singer's feelings for Antonapoulos transform him into the typical romantic lover. Restless and lonely when Antonapoulos leaves for the hospital, Singer haunts the places he and his friend

⁵Chester E. Eisinger, Fiction of the Forties (Chicago, 1963), pp. 246-247.

once visited. Since Antonapoulos is the only person who exists in Singer's private world, Singer cannot be more than a passive love object for Mick, Jake, and Copeland. With them Singer is the one loved, but with Antonapoulos, he is the unfulfilled lover. His relationship with the Greek is completely analogous to the relationship of Mick, Jake, and Copeland to him for the reason that Antonapoulos is mentally incapable of returning his love.

Singer's nightmare symbolizes the futility and one-sidedness of these relationships.⁶ In his dream, he stands naked on a dark stairway with Mick, Jake, and Copeland kneeling directly behind him. Behind them there is a large crowd, also kneeling. At the top of the stairs, Antonapoulos kneels worshipping some shadowy object. The positions of these characters on the stairway symbolize the lover-beloved chain. Mick, Blount, and Copeland are Singer's lovers, and they stand behind him on the steps just as he stands behind Antonapoulos, his beloved. The dream implies that those behind Mick, Blount, and Copeland love them in the same hopeless way they love Singer.⁷ This dream clearly defines

⁶Wayne D. Dodd, "The Development of Theme through Symbol in the Novels of Carson McCullers," Georgia Review, XVII (1963), 207.

⁷Ibid., p. 207.

Singer's symbolic existence. He occupies the central position on the stairway just as he forms the center which gives meaning to the lives of Mick, Copeland, and Blount. Everyone loves the person directly above him, but each one is indifferent to those below who love him. This stairway, then, is a symbol of the failure of love because each person in the chain, in turning his back on those below him, prevents any relationship in which love is exchanged.

In The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, the narrator explains the strange characteristics of love. By its very nature, love is unreciprocal:

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.⁸

For this reason, the one-sided relationships end in unhappiness and sorrow. If one loves, the narrator explains, then the beloved returns that love with hate:

Almost everyone wants to be the lover. And the curt truth is that, in a deep secret way, the state of being beloved is intolerable to many. The beloved fears and hates the lover, and with the best of reasons. For the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved.⁹

⁸ McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe in The Ballad, p. 24.

⁹ Ibid., p. 25.

The Ballad of the Sad Cafe symbolizes the bizarre nature of love in the relationships that exist between Miss Amelia, Cousin Lymon, and Marvin Macy. The triangle formed by these lovers is a series of unreciprocated love affairs: Marvin Macy loves Miss Amelia and scorns Cousin Lymon, Miss Amelia loves Cousin Lymon and hates Macy, and Cousin Lymon adores Marvin Macy and despises Miss Amelia. In each of these relationships, there is one lover and one beloved.

In a more extreme way, the same is true of the relationship between Captain Penderton and Private Williams. In his feelings for Williams Penderton is a distorted, grotesque version of the romantic lover:

When the Captain knew in advance that he would meet the soldier, he felt himself grow dizzy. During their brief, impersonal meetings he suffered a curious lapse of sensory impressions . . .¹⁰

Like the other lovers in Mrs. McCullers' world, the Captain is thwarted in his love. Williams, only vaguely aware of the Captain, remains ignorant of his strong feelings. He does not relate the Captain's bizarre behavior to himself. The failure of the strange relationship between the officer and the young soldier is symbolized by the murder of Private Williams. The Captain's masochistic and self-destructive tendencies force

¹⁰McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye in The Ballad, p. 570.

him to destroy Williams, the only person he has ever loved. When Williams dies, the Captain experiences his own destruction. Before he fires, he realizes everything is over, that he has no chance for survival: "He was only certain that this was the end."¹¹ After the shooting, Penderton looks lifeless while Private Williams appears to be alive:

The Captain had slumped against the wall. In his queer, coarse wrapper he resembled a broken and dissipated monk. Even in death the body of the soldier had the look of warm, animal comfort.¹²

Although the murder of Private Williams adds to the grotesqueness of Carson McCullers' world, it is more than a manifestation of the author's gothic impulse. A final expression of Penderton's ascetic, masochistic tendencies, Private Williams' death symbolizes the destructive power of loneliness.

Symbolically parallel to the murder scene is the Captain's wild ride on his wife's horse, Firebird. Several critics have interpreted the symbolic ride during which the Captain struggles for his life. Ihab Hassan believes Firebird "may stand as an embodiment of instincts,"¹³ and Oliver

¹¹Ibid., p. 594.

¹²Ibid., p. 594.

¹³Hassan, p. 215.

Evans thinks the horse "symbolizes the vital principle, the part of man that does not submit to discipline."¹⁴ Evans also states that he "may have identified the horse's lawlessness with the lawlessness of the passion which he feels for Private Williams."¹⁵ This interpretation is accurate insofar as it goes, but the Captain's encounter with Firebird symbolizes his entire relationship with the soldier. Just as his relationship with Williams temporarily gives meaning to his life, the Captain's ride on Firebird enables him to live for the first time. After giving up all hope of saving himself, Penderton momentarily experiences the previously unknown thrill of living:

And having given up life, the Captain suddenly began to live. A great mad joy surged through him. The emotion, coming as unexpectedly as the plunge of the horse when he had broken away, was one that the Captain had never experienced.¹⁶

The ride, like the relationship with Williams, ultimately defeats the Captain:

He sank down on the ground and lay in a curious position with his head in his arms. Out in the

¹⁴Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers (New York, 1965), p. 63.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁶McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye in The Ballad, p. 551.

forest there, the Captain looked like a broken doll that has been thrown away.¹⁷

The central symbol in Reflections in a Golden Eye is Williams.¹⁸ Because of his passive personality, he can only reflect the other characters and their actions. His eyes are frequently compared to an animal's: "In his eyes, which were of a curious blend of amber and brown, there was a mute expression found in the eyes of animals."¹⁹ The eyes of Williams have symbolic parallels in the eyes of Firebird that reflect the Captain's frightened image and in the eyes of the giant bird in the Captain's dream and Anacleto's paintings. As John Vickery points out, Williams is the "symbolic counterpart of the bird."²⁰ The young soldier's eyes give back a freakish image of the Captain. After his encounter in the woods with Williams, Penderton begins to see himself as he appears in these reflections--"there came to him a distorted doll-like image, mean of countenance and

¹⁷Ibid., p. 552.

¹⁸John M. Bradbury, Renaissance in the South (Chapel Hill, 1963), p. 111.

¹⁹McCullers, Reflections in a Golden Eye in The Ballad, p. 502.

²⁰John B. Vickery, "Carson McCullers: A Map of Love," Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, I (1960), 21.

grotesque in form."²¹ This partially explains the terrible grotesqueness of the characters and their environment. The reader sees only a distorted mirror image of the world created in this novel.

This idea of a mirror-image world appears in all Mrs. McCullers' work. Irving Malin points out that one characteristic of the New American Gothic in Carson McCullers' fiction is the narcissistic nature of the characters. He believes her characters are trapped and isolated by their own self-love and not by their unreciprocated love for another. The lover, unable to escape his narcissism, endeavors to make his loved ones reflections of himself. In this way, his feelings for his loved one become a way of expressing his self-love. According to this interpretation, Reflections in a Golden Eye is a study of a completely inward, narcissistic world. Suffering from self-love, every character cares only about the satisfaction of his own desires to the extent that he is powerless to reach across the gulf between himself and the other characters.²² The same is true for The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in which Copeland, Blount, Mick, and Singer

²¹McCullers, Reflections in The Ballad, p. 585.

²²Irving Malin, New American Gothic (Carbondale, 1962), p. 23.

exemplify the narcissism in Mrs. McCullers' world.²³ In their attempt to turn Singer into a hero, they make him a mere reflection of themselves. Copeland turns Singer into a man who understands and sympathizes with the problems of the Negro, while Blount makes Singer a reflection of himself by seeing him as one who believes in radical social reform. Also, Mick's mirror image of herself is the Singer who understands and loves great music. As Malin observes, Singer is also trapped by his narcissism. Because he is not able to live without an ideal image of himself, he commits suicide when Antonapoulos dies.²⁴ Singer's suicide is a symbol of the death and destruction that are the inevitable outcome of love in Carson McCullers' world. His death symbolizes the failure of his love for the Greek and the failure of his relationship with Blount, Mick, and Copeland.

The symbol of the destructive power of love in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe is the boarded up, dilapidated cafe standing in the center of town. It expresses the failure of Miss Amelia's love for the hunchback. She opens the cafe out of love for Cousin Lymon and closes it after his

²³Malin, p. 23.

²⁴Malin, p. 23.

departure with Marvin Macy. Its run-down condition symbolizes the grotesqueness of love and Miss Amelia's spiritual death after she loses Cousin Lymon. Her physical appearance is evidence of the grotesque effects of loneliness: "Miss Amelia let her hair grow ragged, and it was turning gray. Her face lengthened, and the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy."²⁵ And her eyes cross "as though they sought each other out to exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition."²⁶

In The Member of the Wedding, the failure of love is symbolized by Berenice, who married three times after the death of her first husband in an attempt to recapture the happiness she experienced with him. Her failure is symbolized by the violence of her last marriage which results in the loss of her eye. She replaces the lost eye with a blue glass one that makes her a freak and emphasizes her incompleteness. The unnatural eye is another symbol of the power of love to make the lover a freak.

²⁵McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe in The Ballad, p. 64.

²⁶Ibid., p. 64.

Like Berenice, most of the characters are symbols Mrs. McCullers employs to reinforce her doctrine of the futility of love and the essential separation of the lover and the beloved. In the passage on love in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, the narrator states:

. . .this lover about whom we speak need not necessarily be a young man saving for a wedding ring--this lover can be man, woman, child, or indeed any human creature on this earth.²⁷

She also says: "Now, the beloved can also be of any description. The most outlandish people can be the stimulus for love."²⁸ These statements are an explanation of the grotesqueness of the inhabitants of this world. Not intending that they be realistic representations, Mrs. McCullers uses her characters to symbolize her theory about the nature of love.²⁹ Miss Amelia's love for the hunchback, Singer's love for the idiot Antonapoulos, Biff's feelings for the awkward, adolescent Mick, and Captain Penderton's passion for the young soldier, all unnatural relationships in which one or

²⁷Ibid., p. 24.

²⁸Ibid., p. 24.

²⁹Oliver Evans, "The Case of Carson McCullers," Georgia Review, XVIII (1964), 44.

both of the two involved are freaks, demonstrate that the beloved need not be perfect or attractive to capture the lover.

Another theme almost inseparable from the failure of love is the inability of the characters to communicate with each other. Dialogue and love reach the same dead end because, as John Vickery explains in his analysis, everyone craves to be understood, but nobody tries to understand.³⁰ This parallels the narcissistic love relationships in this world in which everyone wants to be the lover, but nobody accepts the love offered to him. This failure of communication is one of the central themes in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter where Singer's deafness is a symbol of his inability to understand those close to him. Mick, Blount, and Copeland confide in Singer because they think he is the only person capable of true understanding. In his presence, they talk ceaselessly, but Singer fails them because his understanding is limited to a few naive observations such as "she likes music. I wish I knew what it is she hears"; or about Jake, "he will shake his fist and say ugly drunken words that I would not wish you to know about. He thinks he and I have a

³⁰Vickery, Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, I, 16.

secret together but I do not know what it is"; or about Copeland, "This black man frightens me sometimes. His eyes are hot and bright. He asked me to a party and I went. He has many books. However, he does not own any mystery books."³¹

Singer's deformity symbolizes this one-way dialogue and his failure to make himself understood to Antonapoulos. As Oliver Evans commented, Singer is the "ideal symbol of man's inability to communicate with his neighbor."³² Singer confides in Antonapoulos, and during his visits to the hospital, his hands (another symbol of the failure of communication)³³ cannot move fast enough to shape the words he wants to speak. His naive assumption that the Greek understands reveals that he makes the same mistake the others make about him: "This was the friend to whom he told all that was in his heart. This was the Antonapoulos who no one knew was wise but him."³⁴

The possibility of successful communication exists in the character of Biff Brannon. In The Heart Is a Lonely

³¹McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in The Ballad, p. 355.

³²Evans, Georgia Review, XVIII, 44.

³³Hassan, p. 213.

³⁴McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in The Ballad, p. 343.

Hunter Biff stands out as the one person with whom the others might communicate because he seeks to understand rather than to be understood. As John Vickery comments, this possibility is doomed because Biff:

. . .uses words, and it is this that the searchers fear since it holds out the possibility of disagreement and rebuke whereas they wish only for encouragement to continue in those dreams by which they are endeavoring to live.³⁶

The only alternative to this failure of communication is presented in the epilogue to The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. The epilogue is an evaluation of the attempt to escape the loneliness of an inward world through love and communication. Although love must end in failure and inevitably transform the lover into a prisoner of his own self, a transitory joy accompanies his attempt to find a meaningful existence outside himself. For example, Miss Amelia is transformed by her love for Lymon from a ruthless, greedy person into a happy, generous woman. The lover becomes like a member of the chain gang who finds temporary release from his loneliness and misery through his song. The song begins hesitatingly with one voice, but as each prisoner joins in with his own solitary song, the total effect is fugal and almost

³⁶Vickery, Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature, I, 18.

divine: "The music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not come from the twelve men on the gang, but from the earth itself, or the wide sky."³⁷ After the song, the only sound that can be heard is the sound of the prisoner's picks reminding the observer that the fate of the prisoners has not changed. The lonely silence broken only by the picks hitting the hard ground makes the music seem unreal, imaginary. For a moment, however, it joined the prisoners in a common attempt to alleviate their isolation. Although their song fails to provide more than a temporary escape, its real value is the deeper, more lasting effect it has on the listener. The music transforms a dull August afternoon into a joyful experience: "It is music that causes the heart to broaden and the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright."³⁸

Carson McCullers' world, then, is a reflection or mirror image of the real world. It can be likened to the peacock's eye in Anacleto's painting in which objects are contracted and made grotesque by the quality and shape of the bird's eye. Looking into the golden eye of the peacock,

³⁷McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe in The Ballad, p. 66.

³⁸Ibid., p. 66.

the observer sees a distorted reflection of the object rather than its actual representation. This idea applies to Mrs. McCullers' fiction where the world is a reflection made grotesque by the impossibility of love and the failure of communication.

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