

Title – Cultural Back Alleys in the Southern Gothic Fiction of Carson McCullers

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Abstract: This paper analyzes and evaluates the cultural relevance and social criticism embedded in the novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, written by Carson McCullers. The novel deals with the southern crisis of identity, emphasizing this by the use of the literary grotesque within the style of Southern Gothic writing. A significant contribution of this research is the effort to define the Southern Gothic style of writing and evaluate this novel's place within and expansion of this definition. McCullers' relevant use of the Southern Gothic style emphasizes the brutality of racism and social alienation, and a study of her culture and her style exposes the novel as a social critique on her native home of the South. This paper also studies the state of the southern culture around the time of publication, which is 1940. After the First World War, the South saw a period of ambivalence and paradox where the citizens both hoped for change but longed for the steadfastness of the past traditions. This struggle spurred the Southern Renaissance, and during this movement many southern writers sought to explore the balance between respecting the past and pressing toward the future. Carson McCullers was deeply aware of the social, political, and economic issues of her time and she chose to combat them by presenting the individual, day-to-day consequences that they pose. This choice was her effort to encourage a possible way to move forward from their rocky past. The novel also works to reveal the injustice of the treatment of African Americans in her native region, and McCullers

highlights the humanity of her African American characters to show their relation to their community members, particularly whites, a topic that has not been extensively explored by critics. At the core of the White South of McCullers' day was the delusion of the white man's superiority, not based on his character, but on the pride of being just born white. This paper concludes that McCullers' choice of a Southern Gothic style worked to urge Southerners toward societal reform by showing them the injustices in their culture and urging them to move away from negative traditions, and her development of the Southern Gothic style allowed for further acceptance of the style as a beautiful, not just spectacular, style of literature.