

Incongruity and Social Expectations:  
Cultural Identity in Carson McCullers' Southern Gothic Novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

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## Chapter 1: Identities in Context

*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* as a Picture of a Corrupt South

Carson McCullers' Southern Gothic novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) depicts the cultural nuances of the American South of the 1930s and 40s and identifies the social struggles of racism, corrupt capitalism, and prejudice by refining the element of the grotesque in order to present harsh truths without the element of overt horror. McCullers presents five characters living in a small southern mill town and identifies the isolation they face and the spiritual struggles resulting. The townspeople reject these five people due to their deviation from culturally imposed identity factors regarding race, gender, and class. These characters are Mick Kelly, an adolescent tomboy with a passion for music, Biff Brannon, an observant café owner, Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, an African-American doctor fighting for the dignity of his people, Jake Blount, a wanderer enraged by capitalist mistreatment, and John Singer, a deaf-mute separated from his closest friend. The former four characters all meet Singer and find comfort in sitting and talking to him while Singer reads their lips, and they continue to visit and vent their anger to him until Singer commits suicide for reasons they do not know. The novel calls attention to the struggles of these characters and the state of the southern community in which they live by utilizing the style of the Southern Gothic and placing them in the novel's present day, 1938—a time which McCullers knew deeply since she grew up in Columbus, Georgia. The Southern Gothic style revolves around southern culture and conflict, highlighting the grotesque truths of each by presenting individuals deeply affected and marred by them. Although McCullers had close ties to the South, she recognized the social, political, and economic issues of her community, choosing to combat them by presenting the individual, day-to-day consequences that they pose. The novel focuses intently on the alienation and loneliness that

many individuals live within as a result of social injustice and prejudice. Understanding the historical context of McCullers' culture and the state of Southern literature in her time lays the groundwork for analyzing the novel, and defining the style of Southern Gothic writing is necessary before clarifying McCullers' involvement in the style.

### **Major Themes in the Novel**

Through broader social issues, McCullers illustrates the alienation and isolation caused by outcast individuals' inability to communicate and relate within their community. The social issues *Heart* focus on include racism, the inconsistencies of capitalism, and social segregation as a product of economic or personal identity differences. Halie Crocker writes of *Heart*: "Loneliness, spiritual isolation, and the impossibility of human love are recurring themes in much of McCullers's writing" (153). For example, the main characters are those considered 'social misfits' specifically due to physical handicaps, maturity levels, or temperaments, but more broadly gender, class, or race. McCullers writes in her collection of essays, "Spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my themes. My first book was concerned with this, almost entirely and all of my books since, in one way or another" (*The Mortgaged Heart* 274). By "isolation," the novel refers to those who, for various internal and external reasons, withdraw themselves from community. *Heart* identifies the walls that people build between one another, separating themselves into groups that they believe fit together and shutting out those who do not fit within these groups. By "spiritual," the novel eliminates religious terms, but refers to the inner spirit and soul of man. So, the spiritual isolation rendered in the novel deals with characters who struggle through social rejection and deep loneliness.

In *Heart*, the isolation seen in the southern mill town accentuates a lack of communication amongst the townspeople. Delma Eugene Presley associates this isolation with

life in the South and emphasizes the point that “even the most fundamental moral efforts, the most basic attempts at communication, are fruitless” (27-28). This lack of communication not only highlights the isolation the characters experience, but also summarizes the issues the characters face. Oliver Evans notes:

Mrs McCullers [sic] moral here is very plain: individuals are prevented from uniting for a useful purpose by fear and by petty differences which divide them and weaken their force, driving them deeper than ever into the isolation which is the result of their failure to achieve harmonious social union. Long-range ideals are thus defeated by purely personal fears and obstinacies (*The Ballad* 51).

Evans argues here that a lack of communion due to “petty differences” ultimately causes the racism and economic unrest seen in the novel, and disharmony results in the town’s rejection of McCullers’ five grotesque characters. These characters, and the theme of isolation, are at the heart of McCullers’ social critique, representing those forced to the margins of society based on their misunderstood differences, and McCullers’ experience as a Southerner allows her to understand these issues personally.

The first reviewers of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* struggled to understand these themes of internal struggle and isolation, and they instead focused on the discernible outward consequences, most often discussing poverty and the adolescent struggles of Mick Kelly (Evans, *The Ballad* 56-7). However, Richard Wright, one of the first reviewers of *Heart*, argued against critics who considered the novel as mostly divorced from racial issues, believing it deals exclusively with individual loneliness. Wright recognized McCullers’ talent for evaluating racism and for presenting African Americans with an “astonishing humanity” that he had not seen in other white writers (Ulin 194). McCullers’ statement supports his claim, as she describes

her experience of writing *Heart* as "...two years of contemplation of certain hideous aspects of the South, such as the white people's treatment of the [Negro]" (*Illumination and Night Glare* 62). Racism comprises a major theme that the novel tackles, though it is not the center of the novel. *Heart*'s presentation of racism deals with the southern community's emphasis on identifying and hinging a person's individual worth by their race. McCullers' overall knowledge of the South and her exposure to social injustice and segregation, observing the individual struggles they aggravate, spurred her to begin writing and working to reveal the problems that the South so often ignored.

### **Brief Biography of Carson McCullers**

Born and raised in Columbus, Georgia, McCullers chose her native region for the setting of her fiction. McCullers wrote *Heart* in 1939 when she was just 22 years old, and she published the novel through Houghton Mifflin when she was 23. *Heart* is the only novel she wrote while living in the South, and it is her most celebrated novel. At the publication of *Heart*, she was almost instantly famous. Louis Rubin writes that her perception at such a young age was remarkable, and adds, "The talent that was able to observe the variety of experience that went into those characterizations was something close to genius. The capacity for observation for perceiving and detailing the concerns of the various people, was stunning in its virtuosity" (116). *Heart* urges social reform in the South and does this by reflecting on broken human relationships and the pain of isolation, which, as the novel presents, are a product of social bias and segregation among classes and races alike.

As a resident, McCullers witnessed both the positive and negative aspects of the South. She recalls in her autobiography, "We were exposed so much to the sight of humiliation and brutality, not physical brutality, but the brutal humiliation of human dignity which is even

worse” (*Illumination and Night Glare* 62). Even as a child, she had the insight to realize that social brutality often manifested in non-violent ways, and she saw the challenges that she would face in addressing that brutality. Her awareness developed “a deeply embedded ambivalence about the land of her youth, about her own past...the fact that she was a Southerner was a great burden she struggled to displace very early in her career” (Presley 19). McCullers grew up so close to social imperfections that she grew ashamed of southern traditions—her first step toward a literary career in challenging the South.

A significant part of McCullers’ development as a writer grew from her passion for reading. She muses in her autobiography, “My librarian cousin once remarked that I didn’t only read books, but libraries. It is true that my nose was in a book from the time I was ten until this day” (McCullers *Illumination* 58). While McCullers grew up, the writing world for women in the South was sparse. When they read, they had to immerse themselves into the lives of men because women did not receive as much treatment in literature (Westling “Sacred Groves...” 51). This necessity frustrated McCullers and influenced her own work. McCullers especially loved Russian literature, and she famously compares it to Southern literature in her collection of writings entitled *The Mortgaged Heart*. Her knowledge of literature grew both her awareness of culture and of the literary sphere which she would join.

Growing up in the religion-soaked culture of the South, McCullers preferred to view herself as moral, but she prided herself on her unique religious positions and understanding of spirituality. For example, Virginia Spencer Carr notes in her intimate biography that McCullers sometimes felt God was a “capricious deity whose specialty was freaks” (194), and she further observes, “McCullers never stopped thinking of herself as a Christian, no matter what she thought of the organized church and orthodox dogma, or how much she satirized it in her fiction”



(Carr 115). McCullers did not fully reject religious values, as Groba argues, “Her attitudes and her concern for the oppressed and the downtrodden accorded with the social ethics of Christianity” (“Ivan Illych...” 125). Her value of morality and mutual respect aligns with Christianity, but she completely avoided associating herself with any religious institution or denomination. While Jan Whitt cautions that any criticism McCullers poses toward religious institutions “in no way reflects a disinterest in spiritual issues such as faith, immortality, the life of Christ or forgiveness,” she remarks that McCullers’ “satire does reveal a writer who could recognize hypocrisy and paradox when she saw them” (214). McCullers distrusted traditions and sought to expose corruptness and hypocrisy in the stale, unchanging nature of customs, of which organized religion often abounds.

Her passionate distaste for the traditions of the South and their effects on its residents energized Carson McCullers’ eagerness to move to the North. These traditions include those described above, such as ritualistic religion and white supremacy over other races, but also the social intolerance for misfits. Her husband Reeves once wrote to a friend: “I have to keep Carson tied by a leg to the bedpost at times to keep her from going mad as she hates the South so” (Quoted in Presley 23), and McCullers wrote herself: “That is one of the things I love most about Brooklyn. Everyone is not expected to be exactly like everyone else” (Quoted in Presley 23-24). The opposite feelings, native to the South, account for the alienation of *Heart*’s southern characters, based on their ‘unforgivable’ differences. McCullers idealized the North, often unfairly comparing a foreign land to the home she intimately knew. However, this comparison gave her fuel to expose the prejudices of the South throughout her career.

In September 1967, McCullers died at 50 years old. She suffered three strokes during her lifetime that resulted from her undiagnosed rheumatic fever as a child. Her strokes caused

paralysis in her left side by the age of 31, and she was bedridden for the majority of her later years until she died of a brain hemorrhage. Her audience mourned her death. The *New York Times* eulogy emphasized the power of McCullers' first novel, noting that *Heart* was the novel that "encompassed" and "went beyond" the Southern Gothic form. They wrote that McCullers was "an inspiration and example for other artists who grew close to her" (Fremont-Smith n.pag). In addition to McCullers' success as an author, her powerful and incongruous personality made her a dynamic woman and a fashionable person to know in New York's art world. She did not care to dabble in housework or womanly affairs, but focused on writing, walking and wine. Her personality, status, and understanding of the southern culture gave her a unique voice with which to address society and urge them to understand the problems of their history and move forward with positive change.

### **Historical Influence**

The focus in *Heart* on corrupt culture is a reflection of McCullers' deep disappointment with the state of southern culture, and the Southern Gothic style in *Heart* complements the themes of the novel. The lives of the five main characters and their associations with society embody the cultural themes in *Heart*. These themes revolve around issues that result in individual loneliness, "such as adolescent initiation, the dangers of capitalism, and the evils of racism" (Champion 48). McCullers' awareness of and concern for society spurred a realistic piece that deals with "socioeconomic issues," and her original outline includes further notes of social commentary that occur in the novel (Korenman 12, McCullers *Mortgaged Heart* 124). Since McCullers grew up in the South and came into maturity while under its wing, her experiences gave her a realistic view of the southern cultural state that allowed her to evaluate the social situation for its incongruous practices and values. McCullers sensed the detachment

many Southerners felt from the rest of society, which resulted from an emotionally torn society on the verge of major change (Hise 22). This society found its way into *Heart*, and Hise writes, “McCullers’ characters’ sense of detachment, their struggles to establish some bond with, or even within, society, and the reasons for the characters’ loneliness and desperate struggle come as much from external factors as internal” (22). The external factors for the characters in *Heart*, as members of the southern society, stem from the alienation forced by fellow Southerners, who dislike them based on their strange appearance or incongruous identities and passions. The internal factors result from the characters’ own dissatisfaction in a society that denies them the right to live the lives they wish to, due to economic issues, and denies them the privilege of respectful treatment, because of their rejected identities.

In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, historical details provide the setting’s year in order to bring to mind the social situation of the time. The novel includes such references as Biff Brannon’s mention of the war in the Orient (the Soviet-Japanese border conflicts), his collection of newspapers dating back 20 years to 1918, Harry Minowitz’s vehement hatred for Hitler, and Hitler on the radio as the voice of “doom” (McCullers *Heart* 17, 133, 244-245, 355, 357). These historical details serve as references that show the novel as set in 1938, signaling the social situation.

Two of the significant historical events that surround McCullers’ novel are World War I and II, which influenced the development of the southern mindset by forcing them to separate more fully from agrarian lifestyles. Dara Downey summarizes the mindset of “conservative Southern intellectuals” as the wars developed the economy, concluding that they “bewailed the loss of the ‘old ways’, primarily those of an agricultural economy and a system of paternalistic, quasi-aristocratic land ownership” as supported by her sources Bradbury, Holman, O’Brien, and

Gray (368). This mindset lingered long after the Civil War, after which the Reconstruction period forced the South to lose their “primary source of income—unwaged labour,” altering a way of life they believed was beneficial to all society, a mindset that continued even until the World Wars (Downey 368). The new industrial developments and jobs made necessary by the World Wars worked to break the South out of their traditional mindset, as well as their economic lifestyle, and move forward into modernization.

However, without the proper treatment of industry, the conditions that Southerners found themselves subjected to did not put them in a place to improve their culture. For example, in South Carolina, the state in which McCullers grew up and set her novel, the land became “racked by diseases peculiar to poverty, a harsh sharecropper system, and by low income and little education” (Holman 51). Southerners had little to no opportunity to improve their own families’ situations, and this poverty hardly lent itself to an individual concern for society. If their own families starved, men could not worry themselves to consider social issues outside of their own needs.

As the South submitted to the Great Depression, the situation of industry only became worse. Ralph McGill relays in his book, “There grew out of the collapse of cotton and the depressed economy one of the most shameful stories of the South’s economic history” (193). He further explains the whites’ exploitation of African Americans by hiring them for cheap labor, as well as the government’s financing (and five-year tax exemption) of new construction to lure the production of new industries (193). These problems resulted in a “deluge of shysters,” manufacturing low-quality products and overworking their employees for scandalously low pay (194). As employees realized the desperation of their situation, they led strikes, such as Blount wishes to lead in the novel, in which the factory owners refused to budge, and the workers began

to starve. These strikes sometimes even required the intervention of the National Guard (197). The injustices of industrialization, though in bad shape before the Depression, sank to unthinkable depths during the 1930s.

Although the lower class citizens often dominate discussion regarding the Great Depression, middle class and working class citizens also suffered severe effects. The middle class had a significant amount of individual pride, so that when they needed to borrow money, they insisted that they would repay, but they felt shame for needing money and, eventually, for not having money to pay back their debts (McElvaine 53). This shame was often inflicted by government officials who blamed “plain folk” for their poverty, based on their incompetence and regardless of their history of hard work or intellect, notwithstanding the current economic state (Smith 5). This information particularly relates to Mick Kelly’s family in the novel as they represent an average income, but they still struggle to meet their financial needs. As the novel is set in 1938, right at the close of the Great Depression, the Kelly family works to repay debts that they have little hope of repaying without aid from every member of the family. For the middle class, their pride got in the way of their need to seek help; even “...at their lowest reservoir of resources, self-esteem, and hope...the notion that it was undignified for a white man to perform menial or servile tasks for other men permeated the South” (Smith 6). This pride came from the heavy class system of the South, influenced and solidified by the history of slavery.

Racism, a common theme in Southern literature, also appears uniquely through the novel’s presentation of Dr. Copeland as McCullers, a white woman, delves into Copeland’s perspective in order to reveal the effects of racism in his life. McCullers describes a moment during the Depression when she saw African-Americans “rooting through the garbage pails at home, and coming to the house to beg,” and she realized “that there was something fearful and

wrong with the world, but I had not in any way thought of it intellectually” (McCullers *Illumination* 13). As a child, McCullers knew that African Americans did not deserve the mistreatment they faced from the white community, and her childhood frustration towards the poverty of African Americans reflects her appreciation for people of different races and backgrounds. McCullers understood racism to be a cruel injustice, one that *Heart* combats by detailing the inhumane treatment dealt to Dr. Copeland and his family.

Additionally, *Heart* presents the process of adolescent initiation during deep economic unrest through Mick Kelly. The novel creates an empathetic portrait of her adolescent struggles and shows the injustice of Mick’s necessity to work full-time while she should be in school. Adolescence, for Mick and for McCullers herself, proved difficult because of society’s expectations for young ladies. Instead of grace and subservience, the two women had in common a tomboy quality, awkward height, and a set of goals for their lives that society did not promise them. Mick’s disappointment in her society surfaces when her family’s poverty requires her to take a full-time job. In addition to social expectations, *Heart* shows Mick’s experiences as a critique of capitalism, believing the system to be often unfair and hypocritical. The economic state forces Mick to drop out of high school to work, ultimately crushing her own dreams (McCullers *Heart* 66-67). Although the system of capitalism claimed to reward hard workers and allow an individual to earn their own share, McCullers believed that the lower class citizens still suffered simply because they did not have the same opportunities as the higher class. The novel directs attention to factory workers who must work in rough manual labor, but still do not earn hardly enough to feed their children. The narrator describes, “These cotton mills were big and flourishing and most of the workers in the town were poor. Often in the faces along the streets there was the desperate look of hunger and loneliness” (McCullers *Heart* 6). *Heart* juxtaposes

the wealthy and “flourishing” upper class with the starving and striving workers to show the imbalance of the capitalist system, and throughout the narrative, the novel continues to emphasize the lingering imperfections of capitalism through the experiences of its characters.

### ***The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter as a Representation of Southern Culture***

Because *Heart* deals with economic issues but does not expressly depict historical events, the cultural reference in the novel lends itself more to commentary of social mindsets than highlighting historical events. The novel applies the well-known historical background instead to frame the culture as its influence, not its consequence, only intermittently mentioning current events. The novel’s mill town does not make history; it treads far behind the heels of progress, and the outside world acts upon them, the town is not an actor (McCullers *Mortgaged Heart* 148, Brinkmeyer 239). This historical treatment has dissuaded critics from exploring the historical relevancy of the novel. Gray discusses the novel’s strong use of pathos and argues that because of its focus on emotion, the novel “demonstrates little interest in such matters as the historical and social context,” basing his suggestion on the characters’ apparent apathy toward outside matters and passion for their own interests (Gray 272-73). While it is fair for Gray to argue that the characters care only about what affects themselves, the cultural implications of the time shape the society the characters live in and produce conditions that develop the opportunities the characters do or do not have. The townspeople in the novel do not involve themselves in changing large historical problems, but Dr. Copeland and Blount notably lament about the conditions that the culture has afforded them. History is “removed from the action,” but not absent from the setting (Hise 23). The churning of issues that spur World War II, the conclusion of the Great Depression, racism, and the Southern Renaissance movement are factors outside the

town, influencing the society of the town, that the people can see and feel, but cannot, or are passive to, change.

Because of this influence in the town, Gray ultimately concludes that even though *Heart's* reference to historical context is slight, he grants that it does show some cultural involvement (272). He admits that the lack of direct historical context serves as conscious concealment, saying, "In some strange way [McCullers] manages to make history function as an *absent presence* in her work. It seems to be not so much omitted from her writing as concealed, made to disappear, and in such a way that the disappearance itself... encourages our active comment" (Gray 273). Although the novel's focus on the historical setting is slight, the subtle historical details indicate a focus on social status of the represented culture. *Heart* speaks to immediate social issues affecting the townspeople. McCullers gives support for this in her proposal to the novel, in which she identifies two of the main themes to be the dissatisfaction of an individual's needs in a "disorganized society" and the inability to express oneself in a "wasteful, short-sighted society," both problems that affect cultures on the worker's level (McCullers *Mortgaged Heart* 124). Her focus on the individual in relation to society encourages a cultural analysis of the town her characters reside within in order to evaluate of the nature of the town's societal inconsistencies.

Ultimately, the novel's treatment of society centers on internal factors in the nature of man. Although man's nature surfaces at any point in history, McCullers specifically finds the events of her own day and her own region as representative of a "society made up of people living not so much with each other as around each other because of an inability to communicate or engage with others" (Hise 36). The town in the novel consists of many people who do not relate to each other or seek to interact towards a positive goal. The novel shows the region she



knew in order to “present her perception of what it means to be a human being,” and by doing so, it attempts to express the humanity of all individuals (Hise 38). In order to unite her own society, McCullers’ novel critiques the incongruities found in the edifice of her known culture.

At the root of many disagreements within southern culture, there lies a lack of communication. Disputes and prejudice linger under the surface, but Southerners have developed a method of coping by failing to acknowledge their arguments and conflicts, practicing a fierce defensiveness by downplaying their faults. Ralph McGill explains, “In its literature, its national and local politics, its fierce insistence on regional identification, its self-conscious regionalism, and its fierce chip-on-the-shoulder defensiveness, the South has consistently and almost embarrassingly revealed its troubled conscience” (217). The South, McGill argues, is a region torn by guilt and shame, one used to ignoring that which they know is wrong. McGill also knew Carson McCullers, and writes of a conversation they had in which she said of the South:

There is a special guilt in us, a seeking for something had – and lost. It is a consciousness of guilt not fully knowable, or communicable. Southerners are the more lonely and spiritually estranged, I think, because we have lived so long in an artificial social system that we insisted was natural and right and just – when all along we knew it wasn’t. The fact that we bolstered it with laws and developed a secular liturgy and sacraments for it is evidence of how little we believed our own deceptions. (217)

McCullers expresses the burden of shame that the South carries because they had advocated an unjust society, even reinforcing it by placing laws beneath their unjust ideals. Unfortunately, the shame she expresses had not yet encouraged the full integration of the South, and the culture of alienation is that which she addresses in the novel. The active presence of minorities made it impossible for society to forget the incongruities in their culture, and the social critique available

to authors results from the juxtaposition of the white people's (sometimes unspoken) desire for segregation "and the brewing dissatisfaction of racial and sexual minorities" (Adams 552). *Heart* uses juxtaposition, such as white supremacist cops abusing the black intelligentsia (Dr. Copeland), to explore this nature of discontent and aggravation between the white South and the minorities of the South.

Another cultural mindset that McCullers experienced was the southern value for the concrete rather than the abstract, influenced by the agrarian society of the South. The rural South was a culture "in which wealth, respect, and even spiritual life were tied far more to the land and the collective work of the bodies than to an individual's mental life producing ideas that could not be seen, touched, woven, or tasted" (Powell 1). The South undervalued their southern intellectuals working in the profession of the mind rather than the hands. This mindset encouraged intellects to either hide their affinity for abstract subjects or move to the North (Powell 5). McCullers was among these intellectuals. Just as she longed to escape the South that undervalued and misunderstood her intellect, her desire for the freedom of the North rippled into the novel. Two of the characters lived in the North for a period, one of whom received his education there, but they found their way back South where their own cultures then reject them because of the northern values they express. This rejection of the intellectual in the South disgusted McCullers and made her long for the North, and the novel produces characters that further stress the single-mindedness of the South.

This single-mindedness permeated McCullers' view of the South, and she contemplates this characteristic and ultimately compares the southern culture to fascism. Brinkmeyer discusses this comparison: "McCullers' South was a version of the fascist systems that America was fighting against, a powerful cultural system that brutally enforced its demands for *conformity* and

*allegiance*” (230 emphasis mine). Not only was the world at war with fascism overseas, but McCullers recognizes fascism in the South’s expectation for conformity and allegiance, and *Heart* combats these characteristics that the South adopted. *Heart* presents a small-scale version of fascism in McCullers’ southern mill town “fractured by fast-changing times and beset with numbing alienation. The novel both explores the dangerous appeal that Fascism offers to the lost and lonely and exposes the authoritarian power of southern society” (Brinkmeyer 239). Although the novel focuses on culture rather than history, the town is an “ironic parable of fascism,” dealing with “the spiritual rather than the political side of the phenomenon” (McCullers quoted in Brinkmeyer 239). This parable of reality manifests itself within southern history and Southern literature as a social commentary on the incongruities in southern culture.

McCullers did not highlight these social issues solely to expose; she chose to deal with societal issues in order to introduce the hope of reform. Rachel Adams suggests:

McCullers thus engages in a project of social criticism that, at its most penetrating, reveals the links between sexual intolerance and racial bigotry, and, at its most hopeful, recognizes—in the gaps between characters’ longings and the suffering they endure—the queer inconsistencies and excesses at the center of the social order that contain the possibility for its refashioning. (Adams 553-554)

McCullers sees hope for society because the problems she presents are not just those that require intervention from the highest reaches of political authority, but those that an individual society can affect by reforming its way of life, doing its part to ensure justice. In essence, *Heart*’s effort to unite society by directing them to reevaluate social barriers is a call to unify themselves under the cause of changing the social issues within their community. The novel’s aim is “to explain the nature of love to a world that is embarrassed by such emotions and which feels far safer in

negating them” (Fletcher 125). The southern society McCullers knew deeply had become comfortable in rejecting the need to reach out to others and find love and communion amongst a diverse community, resulting in a creation of a fruitless society of homogeneity, unwilling to engage with outsiders. Through the characters, the novel simultaneously personifies the mindsets described here and discourages them. The town must continually work together under a banner of interracial and interclass respect if they are to crush the lingering racism or change the economic inequalities that the mill workers face.

### **Southern Literature**

The deep history and incongruous culture of the South created a genre of American literature unique to the region and set apart for southern authors. Because of the South’s heavy history, the main characteristic of Southern literature is widely viewed as a “sense of the past,” and beyond that, the relation of past to present (Hise 25-26, 30). MacDonald describes the uniformity of the theme of the past in Southern literature as the “cohesive force of collective memory” (MacDonald 13). The binding nature of memory allows for community and relatedness among Southerners, which is one of the contributors to the power of social commentary in Southern literature, allowing the writer to engage through this community. Cleanth Brooks’ description of Southern literature is summed up by Thomas Young as follows: “A feeling for the concrete and the specific” by presenting abstract ideas through everyday stories, “an awareness of conflict, a sense of community and of religious wholeness” by identifying both the gaps that obstruct unity and the elements of community that bind them together, “a belief in human imperfection, and a genuine and never wavering disbelief in perfection never developing as a result of human effort and planning” by presenting hypocrisies and injustices that result from the handiwork of men (263). These elements invariably emerge in *Heart*, since the literature that

results from this cohesion of elements often lends itself to highlighting the tragic and ugly nature of man and the conflicts that result from man's nature. Southern literature of the early twentieth century focused heavily on developing these conflicts, and this focus created a pivotal period of Southern literature based on the conflict between the past and the present, known as the Southern Renaissance.

### **The Southern Renaissance**

Around the two World Wars, roughly 1920-1950, America experienced a Southern Renaissance in art based on the South's progression from traditional to modern (Gray 1). This art movement comprised the majority of McCullers' life, and she became a unique part of it through her literature. The Southern Renaissance turned the needle of the literary compass to southern culture and southern authors, previously turned to northern cities such as Chicago, Boston, and New York City (Young 262). Cleanth Brooks, who most frequently lived and worked in the South, led the dominant theory of criticism, New Criticism (Young 262). At the time, the South had the least advanced economic system in America, paid the least attention to literature, and provided the least support to government development and art (Young 262). Any attention paid to the South generally dealt with economic instability. For example, "...in one of his fireside chats President Roosevelt proclaimed the South the nation's number one economic problem" (Young 262). The Southern Renaissance came as a surprise, based on the South's reputation for literary apathy, seeing it as the least of their concerns.

However, after World War I, the South went through a period of ambivalence and paradox where the citizens both hoped for change but longed for the steadfastness of the past traditions (Gray 7). The South began to experience a dread both for losing the past and for moving forward to unknown social situations. In his essay "The New Provincialism," originally

published in 1945, Allen Tate writes, “With the war of 1914-1918, the South reentered the world—but gave a backward glance as it slipped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present” (545). As the South began to push forward to change, the nostalgia for the past they would leave behind caused a surge in the southern literary activity.

The ambivalence the South felt towards progress, though most prominent there, was not singular to the region. While the “erratic process of modernization” left many Southerners concerned with the rapidity of change and what it may bring and left even “mundane social interactions” clouded with uncertainty, the curious effects on the region of the time reflected similar experiences “of the larger nation and globe” (Duck 210). Gray summarizes Lawrence Levine’s argument, saying:

The central paradox of American history...has been a belief in progress coupled with a dread of change; an urge towards the inevitable future combined with a longing for the irretrievable past; a deeply ingrained belief in America’s unfolding destiny and a haunting conviction that the nation was in a state of decline. This duality has been marked throughout most of America’s history but seldom has it been more central than during the decade after the First World War. (Gray 37)

Gray describes Levine’s argument in which he discusses the “progressive impulse,” one which already set change in motion throughout the nation, and the “nostalgic impulse,” filled with uncertainty regarding where the motion will lead the nation, and both these impulses flowed freely in the twenties, in and beyond the South (Gray 37). Southerners, however, voiced their arguments regarding the progress of the South from a stronger seat of fear and confusion than other regions. In many ways, this results from the South’s longtime emphasis on memory,

making it a large part of daily life, and on the dark history in the South, notably slavery and the Civil War, which “qualified Southern nostalgia with feelings of guilt and terror” (Gray 37-38). Such memories created a more emotional pull between the past and the future since Southerners knew of elements both to be proud and ashamed of in their past.

From this pull, the Southern Renaissance materialized as a form of both clinging to and departing from the past, but attempting to understand the appropriate balance between these two ideas. Dara Downey summarizes Gray’s argument, saying, “...much of the literature from the middle decades of the twentieth century depicted the Southern past as continuing to haunt the Southern present. The present was therefore not the present as such, but a form of continuous past” (368). Literature of the Southern Renaissance on one hand showed the past as the foundation of all that is present and on the other hand compared the horrors of the past to the ideal possibilities of the future. However, the ambivalence that the South felt did not completely arrest their movement. Gray argues that the confusion of the South made possible the self-analysis of long-held beliefs and assumptions. The South was “confronted with the fact that the values by which they and their fellows have lived seem to be strangely inappropriate to their changing circumstances; and consequently they [were] obliged to investigate those values to see if any of them [could] survive the change, to be carried over into the new society” (Gray 7-8). As Gray suggests, the South, during the Southern Renaissance, had the opportunity to examine the traditions on which they had formed the basis for their society. The period served as a self-reflection and reformation for an entire region, and through these themes and struggles, the Southern Renaissance developed as a vital contribution to Southern literature.

### **McCullers’ Place in Southern Literature**

McCullers' unique contribution to the work of Southern literature lies in her ability to express the social injustices of racism and corrupt capitalism and in her emphasis on the need to unite communities through the love that results from mutual respect, ultimately advocating the South's need to progress in this way toward modernity. Although McCullers' work is part of the Southern Renaissance, *Heart* does not deal with the themes in the same way as the original authors who wrote during the Southern Renaissance because she published near the later end of the movement (Gray 265). McCullers' year of publication places her in a transitional period for Southern literature, one thick within experimentation in the Southern Gothic style, but still dealing with themes of the South's progression toward modernity. Gray asserts:

Coming after the great fiction and poetry of the twenties and thirties, but before the more recent examples of Southern Gothic...her novels and short stories occupy, consequently, a particular transitional moment of their own in the tradition. Theirs is a special, and especially separate, place in the history of Southern Literature, which makes their author seem occasionally like one of her own characters—alone, cut off from all normal channels of communication, and strangely vulnerable. (Gray 266)

McCullers' novel fills a certain transitional period between essentially Faulkner's early Southern Gothic literature and O'Connor's later Southern Gothic literature, in the New Wave of Southern literature, that so aptly exemplify the Southern Gothic themes (Gray 265). As a transitory novel, *Heart* does not deal with the struggle between the collective past of the South and the potential to move forward, as many southern novels of the time did. Her novel deals with the evaluation of the best possible *method* of moving forward into the New South, acknowledging both that the South must progress and should retain some positive, but reformed southern traits. In essence, the novel's social criticism aimed toward the incorrect way to move forward into the New South,



which spurred McCullers' criticism of racism and corrupt capitalism. Her writing is a byproduct of the themes from the Southern Renaissance as it manages thoughts about the ideal New South while the region stepped forward into unknown social expectations. *Heart* is also a unique contribution to the Southern Gothic style through its effect of keeping focus on exposing a grotesque society and refuting the label of "freak" placed on social outcasts.

McCullers' placement in this transitional period saw her moving away from literary characters who sought to cling to past traditions that were "no longer applicable to the world around them" and moving attention to the "separateness of the individual" found in "vague or confused social contexts" (Hise 33). Her characters are unique individuals unhindered by manners or traditions but alienated from society because they do not meet society's expectations or ideals for gender, race, class, etc. Carol Marion remarks, "The concept of progress itself implies forward movement, but the question that seems to preoccupy the southern consciousness is "Toward what?" (Marion 87). This movement from a resistance of progress to an analysis of progress is the position that McCullers' novel functions within. Her novel does not imply a necessity to cling to tradition but implies a necessity to make progress work in the best possible way for the South and its residents.

### **The Southern Gothic Style**

The Southern Renaissance served as a conduit for the emergence of the Southern Gothic novel, the categorization of novels in which *Heart* belongs. The style began with William Faulkner, who was the first to write a novel that best fits into the current understanding of Southern Gothic, *The Sound and the Fury*, published in 1929, and with *As I Lay Dying* in 1930 he further experimented in his new style (Palmer 122-3). Bailey relays some initial critical discussion on the new form: "In 1935, Ellen Glasgow coined the term 'the Southern Gothic

school' to criticize what she saw as the 'aimless violence'...she mentions specifically 'the fantastic nightmares of William Faulkner'" (Glasgow quoted in Bailey 270). Although the original comments on the style were generally negative, Faulkner continued to shape and refine his experimentation into a personal grotesque style based often on horrific, but significant, appearances of death. After the experiment developed further and critics had a few decades to analyze its strengths, the Southern Gothic style gradually developed a positive reputation (Boyd 41).

Defining the "Southern Gothic" style often oversimplifies the term since the novels that emerged mostly clustered into a few decades, roughly 1930 to 1960, so the form was an experiment for much of its lifetime. When Jay Ellis published the *Critical Insights* anthology on Southern Gothic criticism, he assented to the daunting task of defining the term because of its obscurity and scant volumes of criticism (vii-viii). Nevertheless, the obscurity of the style precisely warrants a thorough examination, especially since contemporary authors, such as Cormac McCarthy, continue to experiment in the style.

The Southern Gothic style developed as an experiment in using the traditional gothic elements to describe the horrors of the South. Edgar Allan Poe's work in American Gothic genre influenced the Southern Gothic form (T. Wright 3). Naturally, the Victorian Gothic writers, such as Horace Walpole, Anne Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, and others, inspired Poe's style. Additionally, Nathaniel Hawthorne also wrote in the American Gothic genre during the same years as Poe, and his works contributed such themes as a distrust for corrupt cultural and religious traditions. Bailey discusses the relationships between the old Gothic styles and the Southern Gothic style (commenting specifically on Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*): "Like virtually all Gothic characters...Bone's [Allison's main character] identity and (from her perspective at least)

her destiny are forged by blood and history, but they are also formed by place” (Bailey 280-281). Bailey discusses how the characterization in Allison’s work relates to the characteristic elements of traditional Gothic characters. In addition to character development, many physical elements of the Old Gothic appear in Southern Gothic, as Marshall writes, “Creepy buildings, mysterious landscapes, unhealthy obsessions with the past, revelations of dark secrets, acts of violence, and troubled mental states are all the hallmarks of the Gothic more generally, and these all invariably crop up in Southern Gothic as well” (15). From the influence of traditional Gothic writers, southern authors used these elements to break down romantic imagery of the South and represent their home as a broken and, often, confused society.

Although the initial negative criticism of the Southern Gothic style (such as Ellen Glasgow’s comments quoted previously) discouraged some writers from experimenting, many well-known authors participated in the form. The movement of the Southern Renaissance made the Southern Gothic style ideal for highlighting the conflicts in the South. Some of the original authors include William Faulkner (1897-1962), Katherine Anne Porter (1890-1980), Thomas Wolfe (1900-1938), Robert Penn Warren (1905-1989), Eudora Welty (1909-2001), Carson McCullers (1917-1967), Truman Capote (1924-1984), Erskine Caldwell (1903-1987), and Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964) (Kestler 32). Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941), though not a Southerner, often visited the South and displayed similar uses of the grotesque that influenced the Southern Gothic style (Kestler 32). Some examples of criticism on these writers include Lawson, who describes Anderson’s characters as “twisted and abnormal, at odds with the world around them, somehow always limited and partial. A few are amusing, but most are pathetic. None is complete . . .” (quoted in Marion 43). This description relates to O’Connor’s characters, as Carol Marion discusses how they embody the “comic and pathetic” (9-10). Additionally,

Susan Donaldson describes Welty's characters as "[blurring] the boundary between those who watch and those who are being watched, between those who suffer and those who inflict the suffering" (580). Similarly, Faulkner's characters obscure the differences between the victim and the villain, often by the inclusion of mental instability or internal suffering. This blurring is a "key development of Southern Gothic," which Faulkner, as the original experimenter, developed (Marshall 10). These authors exemplify the Southern Gothic style, and McCullers' characters relate to other grotesque characters, but represent people outcast unfairly based on social prejudices.

Many Southern Gothic authors demonstrate a simultaneous use of Realism and Southern Gothic, sometimes displayed together in one novel, causing critics to combat the placement of some authors in the Southern Gothic category. However, Bridgett Marshall argues: "While the genres of Realism and the Gothic might seem to be wholly unrelated, the two actually flourished simultaneously, and many authors wrote in both genres. Southern Gothic in particular frequently engages with real historical events and people" (Marshall 14). Realism and the Southern Gothic style cohabitate compatibly, though the balance of some of the authors listed may swing more towards Realism. Although the Victorian Gothic deals mostly with fantastical, romantic elements, and the American Gothic presents supernatural and phenomenological elements, the Southern Gothic style focuses on realism in order to effectively demonstrate cultural problems in the South.

McCullers attempted to explain the Southern Gothic realism as she contemplated the term "gothic" in *The Mortgaged Heart*: "The effect of a Gothic tale may be similar to that of a Faulkner story in its evocation of horror, beauty, and emotional ambivalence—but this effect evolves from opposite sources; in the former the means used are romantic and supernatural, in

the latter a peculiar and intense realism” (252). Here, McCullers recognizes the relation between a gothic tale and Faulkner’s work, but she also notes the difference. She argues that the gothic tales, in terms of the literature of her region, no longer result from a romantic indulgence, but that their realism creates an environment where a ‘self-portrait’ of culture evokes the horror once evoked by fantasy. Understanding the nature of the grotesque in Southern literature creates an opportunity to realize McCullers’ own place within it.

As a method of social critique, the use of the grotesque inhabits a place as one of the main characteristics of the Southern Gothic style. Michael Gillum writes in a research anthology on the grotesque, “Grotesque art has bad manners. It challenges our ideals and our notions of proper order with dissonant elements—disgusting, embarrassing, incongruous, or frightening intrusions” (13). The grotesque form juxtaposes the mannered with the disgusting. Peggy Bailey, a Southern Gothic critic, writes, “Gothic texts...consistently engage “the unspoken” and drag into the light the grotesque truths about the most romanticized of institutions and societies” (282). Gothic novelists address grotesque social issues, such as noted earlier in this chapter, that appear in reality, but the society often ignores, in part through apathy, hopelessness, or embarrassment. Bailey further defines the ‘Southern Gothic’ as “...one that depicts human beings, rendered grotesque by their extreme and incongruous passions and obsessions, as the ultimate source of horror” defining incongruous as “one of the possible synonyms for grotesque” (269, 281). The obsessions of these grotesque characters are often result of their own disconnect from reality. They are sometimes so obsessed with change that they lose any sight of positive traditions (Marion 43). The conflict between those who argue for the steadfastness of past traditions and those who wish for the progress offered by modernity presents a dual depiction of

both their comedic adamancy and their pathetic sightlessness; this dualism is often the material used to create grotesque characters, ultimately depicted as mentally unstable people (Marion 44).

However, grotesque characters are not just those who are mentally erratic; they also appear as deformed, disabled, sexually queer, or simply a departure from the dominant class. Southern Gothic novels “engage with the troubling human assumption about the ways that appearances match reality: the notion that an attractive appearance indicates that someone is morally good, while an appearance that is ugly or somehow outside cultural norms is inherently evil” (Marshall 13). Southern Gothic novelists use this theme especially as a means for social critique, emphasizing the incongruity of trusting or disliking a person based on their appearance. They combat “the inscription of identity through cultural models of gender, class, and ethnicity” (Bailey 270). McCullers meditates on this theme and writes in her collection of essays: “To many a poor Southerner, the only pride that he has is the fact that he is white, and when one’s self-pride is so pitifully debased, how can one learn to love?” (McCullers *Mortgaged Heart* 281). The placement of identity upon external factors creates a group of people marginalized for their appearance. These marginalized people inspire the creation of many grotesque characters, chosen by authors as a means to express the horrors of imposing identity based on external factors.

The Southern Gothic form also deals with racism in a great majority of its novels, since the southern society of the time marginalized African Americans. The slave plantation is a common setting for Southern Gothic novels, though not written by slaves like slave narrative. These settings contain, as Marshall discusses, “Secret rooms that hide evidence of criminal acts (frequently dead bodies),” and the horrors of slavery often manifest through “incestuous crimes” (7, 9). She explains how masters would rape their slaves, rape the offspring of those slaves, and then even sell their own offspring begotten through their slaves (9). Marshall discusses how

these crimes spurred “the Gothic’s obsession with the ‘sins of the fathers’ and with the revelation of unknown or obscured family trees fits well with the severely damaged family situations that resulted from the system of American slavery” (9). The persistence of racism even long after the emancipation outraged Southern Gothic authors, and the cruelties of racism and the history of slavery frequently dominated their social commentary.

As a byproduct of Southern literature, the Southern Gothic style also emphasizes a sense of place. In the Southern Gothic style, ‘place’ is permeated by the “decay and desperation” of the land and its inhabitants (Newland 33). Through this, Southern Gothic authors present the fruitlessness of wishing for the past. The decay of the land represents the inevitability of change, so that when characters displaced from their home long to return, and perhaps do, the reality of change in the land serves as a metaphor for the fruitlessness of clinging to past traditions and refusing to grow. The characters in Southern Gothic literature face “the truth of change, the fact of loss, and the sorrow that comes from the realization that the current generation...will never know what they have lost or that they should care” (Marion 43-44). The latter part of this quote highlights the reality that new generations will never know the traditional Southerner’s idea of the beauty of the land as it once appeared, and the decayed land serves as a metaphor for the history that the South cherished. The sense of place evident in the Southern Gothic style acquiesces to the suggestion that the Southern Renaissance encouraged its original creation, and the transformation of place as a decayed and corrupt land shows the uniqueness of the Southern Gothic style.

### **Conclusion**

The Southern Gothic style intrinsically narrates the realities of southern culture while depicting grotesque characters and events. Although the style contains more complexity, these

are the two main characteristics that make up the core of the style's definition, and the broader elements stem from these two criteria. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* contains both of these themes but uniquely presents alienated characters and highlights their true humanity, arguing that the real fault is on society for excluding people. The novel laments social injustice and prejudice while celebrating the uniqueness of individuality and diverse community. The ultimate message of *Heart* revolves around the incongruities of the southern society's exclusion of those who do not possess their ideal qualities for class, race, and gender. This exclusion creates social outcasts who society labels freaks or grotesques. *Heart* ultimately expresses that this act of exclusion is the true grotesque element of the South, and it does this by presenting the unique perspectives and passions that make every individual valuable and by depicting horrific events that occur as a result of the prejudice that corrupts the novel's southern community.



## Chapter 2: Internal Realities:

### The Southern Gothic Style in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

Although McCullers' novel fulfills the requirement for a depiction of a corrupt southern culture, the novel must still represent the theme of the grotesque in order to qualify as a Southern Gothic novel. The characters in *Heart* do not represent physically grotesque characters that are typically associated with the term "Gothic," but instead, the characters' representation as grotesque revolves around their socially incongruous passions that so deeply consume them. Instead of ignoring their passions and passively accepting their situations, the characters commit themselves whole-heartedly to their chosen cause. Although the average townspeople in the novel strive to make it through life by conforming to the ideal ways of society so they themselves will not be rejected, the main characters are not satisfied to live this way, and they instead begin to fight for their dreams. The main characters in *Heart* do not match the town's view of "normal" because of their overt and grotesque pursuits of their passions, which results in their isolation, yet, by showing their level of commitment, the novel also expresses their humanity and inherent individual worth.

#### **McCullers' Characters as Grotesque**

*Heart* not only critiques the southern society, but it also critiques the bitterness of the social outcasts by showing how that bitterness can ferment and result in selfishness and obsessions. McCullers lays out a simple outline of the novel: "It is the story of five isolated, lonely people in their search for expression and spiritual integration with something greater than themselves" (McCullers *Illumination* 4). These characters each suffer from mental loneliness and anger that result in society labeling them freaks or grotesques, and this mindset drives the novel's social critique. While McCullers' characters face rejection from society because they are social

misfits and “freaks,” as Biff Brannon would say (McCullers *Heart* 14, 22), the novel presents these freaks and explains their nature in order to show that their own callousness and selfishness have reinforced the walls that society originally built.

The portrayal of the main characters as freaks reveals a unifying theme of the five characters in *Heart*, which is the mismatch between appearance and reality. This theme permeates the characterization of the social outcasts in the novel. Southern Gothic novels “engage with the troubling human assumption about the ways that appearances match reality: the notion that an attractive appearance indicates that someone is morally good, while an appearance that is ugly or somehow outside cultural norms is inherently evil” (Marshall 13). This reflects McCullers’ rejection of the bias judgment that permeated the South. *Heart*’s characters illustrate this theme in order to combat the misjudgment the results from evaluating a person only on the external. Understanding how each character is judged, based on their appearance, by the other main characters as well as the townspeople, reveals how the characters serve as incongruent, grotesque people who inflict judgment upon each other while simultaneously spurning the prejudice directed toward their own identities.

McCullers’ five main characters (John Singer, Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, Mick Kelly, and Dr. Benedict Copeland) each serve as symbols for negative societal biases. They together represent a group of people living as social outcasts because of society’s intolerance for their differences. Each character’s inherent incongruities result in their isolation from fellow man, cutting them off from fellowship and understanding. However, the town is not solely guilty of their loneliness. The four characters apart, Singer excluded, are uncivil even to each other, and their disrespect towards each other baffles Singer. He knows that they all have similar deepset frustrations, but their selfishness regarding their own needs clouds any understanding of other

people's needs (McCullers *Heart* 210-211). Without the four characters' mutual respect for mankind, Singer will have no effect on helping them through their frustrations because their complaints hinge upon their disgust for their fellow man (Rich "The 'Ironic Parable...'" 115). Although there is no sole main character in the novel because the novel looks at five different points of view, Singer is really the center of the novel because each character interacts with his story, and he interacts with them. Without his character, there would be no unifying logic for looking at each character's point of view. In part I, after each character is introduced, the character quickly leaves the scene, and then the next character comes into the story. At first, there is no apparent connection between the lives of the four characters, and this drifting feeling might prevail were it not for McCullers weaving Singer into each of their lives (Farrelly 18). His place in each of their lives creates the connection between the characters that allows their analysis as a unit of isolated people.

John Singer is a misfit that by his external appearance is mistaken for an average man. When Blount first meets Singer, for example, he does not immediately realize that Singer is a "dummy," as Blount calls him, and this gives the idea that Blount's perceptions about Singer's appearance are devoid of reality because his first impression ultimately clouds his thinking about Singer (McCullers *Heart* 55). Biff also defines Singer as a "freak," even though he is sympathetic to him, saying that he would give Singer free alcohol if he wished for it (McCullers *Heart* 22). Singer's appearance appears normal and relatable, but the reality of his person is incongruous to his appearance. McCullers writes in her outline of the novel, "On the surface he is the model of kindness and cooperativeness—but nothing which goes on around him disturbs his inner self" (McCullers *Mortgaged Heart* 126). Singer feels no connection or relation to the events or people surrounding him, and though his actions often communicate the opposite, his

true feelings reveal that he does not truly understand the characters that so esteem him. As Singer becomes more of a legend in the town, people begin to speculate about where he came from and define him as something that they personally can understand because his appearance is ambiguous enough to warrant speculation (McCullers *Heart* 199-200). Ultimately, the narrator explains, “As there was no way to disprove these rumors they grew marvelous and very real” (*Heart* 223). Over time, the myth about his background grows more irrational and the speculators more confident. His incongruous and unidentifiable appearance is one indication of Singer’s characterization as a grotesque character.

The four other main characters all attach themselves to Singer because he can read lips and they can talk to him about their problems, but he does not interfere by trying to give advice or rebuke their actions. Singer’s point of view surfaces later in the novel, and until then, the audience sees him through other characters’ eyes or through an omniscient narrator. However, Singer’s own perspective shows that he finds the other characters’ problems silly and just wishes to be with his friend, Antonapoulos, who is in an insane asylum, and is the most grotesque of all the characters (Antonapoulos is discussed later in this chapter). Singer’s perspective exposes his own brokenness and his deep selfishness of the four surrounding characters because they do not seek to understand Singer’s own hurts, but they revel in the comfort of telling him of their own. Singer is ultimately “the symbol of isolation and thwarted expression” (*Mortgaged Heart* 126). Singer has his own deep hurts but little way to communicate them effectively because of the barrier of his handicap. Although the four other characters look to Singer as an ideal, modern man, he is truly isolated and misunderstood.

Biff Brannon is isolated as well, but he separates himself from the town by putting his cash register and counter between him and the people he observes. He is an impotent (for

“psychic as well as physical reasons”), silent observer (McCullers *Mortgaged Heart* 135). McCullers describes him: “In spite of certain quirks in Biff’s nature [feminine elements] he is perhaps the most balanced person in the book. He has that faculty for seeing things which happen around him with cold objectivity—without instinctively connecting them with himself” (*Mortgaged Heart* 137). Although he may be the most balanced on the five social outcasts, his coldness and distance pushes away the townspeople even further, and he is not a truly balanced person. He is passive to his surroundings, though he has deep emotional connections to some of the characters who surround him, like Mick Kelly. To the audience, he portrays a confusing juxtaposition of apathy to his wife’s death and feelings of motherly tenderness to Mick and his niece Baby. As he watches Mick in the café, he thinks of how he wishes he were Mick and Baby’s mother (McCullers *Heart* 132-133). This tenderness is difficult to comprehend when paired with the lack of emotional reaction to his wife’s death.

Although the townspeople do not know how to relate to him, Biff is a philosophical, level man. His socially awkward characteristics highlight his tendency to find meaning in everything and his deep curiosity for the nature of mankind. He seeks to discover the uniting characteristics of man. For example, he tries to understand why he feels guilty for his motherly affection towards Mick, and he concludes that it is a result of “the dark guilt in all men, unreckoned [sic] and without a name” (McCullers *Heart* 233). Biff gives an objective view of the four other main characters as they come in and out of his café, and he does not see them as the rest of the town sees them. He explains the characters in terms of how he analyzes their true self or even describes how their mannerisms can make the townspeople feel, differentiating between how the townspeople see these characters and who they really are (McCullers *Heart* 17-18, 25). His

efforts to understand the other four characters, despite the town's misunderstandings about him, create unification within the inherent natures of the five main characters' loneliness.

Jake Blount's loneliness results from his alcoholism and his passions for political activism. He is new to the town and does not easily win friends, and his passions combined with his drunkenness make him a man that the rest of the townspeople avoid. The novel presents Jake, "who is not physically maimed," as "deformed in the mind" (Kestler 32). Blount does not have any physical grotesque elements, though his outward appearance is physically unattractive; instead, his actions are grotesque because of his inward anger and his alcohol addiction. His fiery passions about economic inequality, which he brings up in nearly every conversation, keep the townspeople distanced from him. The narrator describes, "He was the sort of fellow that kids laughed at and dogs wanted to bite...He could never have friends or even get along with people" (McCullers *Heart* 227). Alice, Biff Brannon's wife, hates Blount for the disruption he causes in their café (McCullers *Heart* 14). The first impression he gives is essentially that of a troublemaker, and, apart from Biff, Singer, and later Dr. Copeland, people do not want him around.

Characteristic of the novel, the madness of Blount's external nature stems from a deep-set internal need. In her outline of the novel, McCullers discusses Blount: "His deepest motive is to do all that he can to change the predatory, unnatural social conditions existing today. It is his tragedy that his energies can find no channel in which to flow" (*Mortgaged Heart* 131). Throughout his presence in the novel, Blount conjures up abstract ideas of how the world should run, but he has no way to move his ideals into action. He tries to stir up a strike with the mill workers, but the workers just laugh at the enraged passion he feels for economic equality (McCullers *Heart* 66-67). In the end, he writes some papers to communicate what he believes,

but feels no one will read them and that his voice will go unheard (McCullers *Heart* 343). Like Singer, he has (or feels he has) no voice because he is misunderstood and misjudged.

Dr. Copeland, as a black doctor, faces endless misjudgment and prejudice as he seeks justice for his race, feeling that he, too, has no voice. He is truly outcast from his own race. He received his formal education in the North and talks like a Northerner, which singles him out among his community. He does not only wish for whites to treat his race correctly, but he seeks in turn for his race to become more educated and dignified in order to earn respect (McCullers *Heart* 193). In order to receive just treatment, Dr. Copeland believes that his people must change to prove themselves worthy of respectful treatment by rising up in dignity (McCullers *Heart* 194). He does not wish them to act like Caucasians, but McCullers explains, “His ideal would be a race of Negro ascetics” (*Mortgaged Heart* 133). However, though his people feel they understand his meaning, he questions if they will truly take it to heart and see his meaning (McCullers *Heart* 197). Though he tries to communicate with his race, he is so different from them, his views are so political, and his language so filled with educated diction that they cannot comprehend.

The difference between Dr. Copeland, his children, and the rest of his fellow African-Americans is that he sacrifices the traditions and mannerisms of his own culture to benefit what he believes are the ideals of their race: to be educated, act nobly, and to work for the betterment of the proletarian class (McCullers *Heart* 77-78). However, his daughter Portia tells him that she and the rest of her community are proud of their heritage, arguing that she speaks the way her mother did and all her ancestors before that (McCullers *Heart* 78). Her pride in her way of speech implies a broader dedication to the African-American culture’s way of life. Dr. Copeland combats Portia’s willingness to work for white people and make it through life in the simplest

way possible. For this view, he is alienated from his family and from the rest of his own people. His grotesqueness comes from his inability to engage with whites or his own race due to his deviation from either community's accepted behavior (Hise 12).

Blount and Dr. Copeland have similar ideas about economic equality within the capitalist system, and they finally have a mutual political conversation, though it still ends in bitter disagreement (McCullers *Heart* 296-305). They each offer extensive critiques of society and capitalism; "however, it is Mick Kelly and her family who best serve to illustrate the destructiveness of a materialistic society" (Korenman 10). Blount and Dr. Copeland have both experienced the harsh injustice of capitalism, but Mick Kelly encompasses the true consequences of unjust economic system.

The arch of Mick's character revolves around her unattainable dream of becoming a composer/conductor and her eventual decline into the necessities of surviving poverty. McCullers sums up her character: "The essential traits of Mick Kelly are great creative energy and courage. She is defeated by society on all the main issues before she can even begin, but still there is something in her and in those like her that cannot and will not ever be destroyed" (*Mortgaged Heart* 130-131). Mick faces the possibility of spending the rest of her life working in mind-numbing jobs for little pay, unable to pursue any dreams of art and music. This possibility, as Blount and Dr. Copeland suggest, is a great injustice. Joan Korenman further explains:

Mick's situation exemplifies some of the criticism leveled by Jake and Dr. Copeland.

Blount assails a capitalist system that keeps the masses in such poverty and suffering that 'something dies in them.' Dr. Copeland feels that the one injustice more bitter than to suffer from real need is 'to be denied the right to work according to one's ability. To labor a lifetime uselessly.' He has in mind his fellow Blacks whose talents are wasted in



menial jobs, but what he says holds true also for Mick's writing sales receipts instead of symphonies. (11 quoting McCullers *Heart* 129, 164)

The novel highlights the injustices of poverty and class system that Blount and Copeland fight against through Mick Kelly's descent from a dreamer to a beaten down worker striving to survive. This injustice is an element of the horrific nature of the South that the novel attempts to reform.

Beyond the portrait of Mick's suffering in an unjust economy, she, like the other characters, has elements of grotesque incongruities in her nature and appearance. Several elements of Mick's character make her socially outcast. In the novel, Mick has just come into physical maturity and is now at an age where being a tomboy is socially unacceptable and she must begin to live as a woman. She feels too tall and awkward, and her family relationships consist of disgust toward her sisters, distance from her mother, shyness toward her father, but a juxtaposition of a simultaneous deep affection toward her brothers, especially her youngest brother, Bubber. These elements alone do not define her as grotesque, but her character's further incongruities bring forth the possibility.

Whether or not Mick is truly grotesque has been the topic of some critical discussion, but while her struggles are not all dissimilar to any adolescent's, her behavioral inconsistencies are ultimately the factors define her as grotesque. In her dissertation on the novel, Patricia Hise argues, "The character of Mick Kelly is not grotesque in any way, but the normal characteristics of adolescence provide the deviation that increases the sense of isolation" (16). Hise suggests that Mick is not grotesque, but just socially awkward enough to isolate her from society. However, Louise Westling, who also wrote extensively on McCullers' works, protests: "As a girl the tomboy is charming; as an adult she is grotesque" ("Tomboys" 339). Westling argues that, in

Mick's society, it is entirely unacceptable to remain a tomboy as late as Mick has. McCullers' honest treatment of Mick is a factor that contributes to the ambiguity of her grotesqueness. The narrator's description of Mick's human needs shows her similarities to society, which makes Mick appear differently through the narrator's eyes than through the town's, suggesting that she is 'not grotesque' even though the town sees her as 'grotesque'.

Mick's incongruities come not from the confusions of growing up, but from the juxtaposition of Mick's simultaneous immaturity and maturity. McCullers writes, "Mick is thoroughly egoistic—and the crudely childish side of her nature comes in side by side with the mature" (*Mortgaged Heart* 128). The indication of Mick's immaturity comes through her selfish treatment of Singer juxtaposed with her sporadic revelation of the deep emotional needs of others, and the inconsistency between these two is her element of grotesque. She does not seek to know Singer's internal needs, but just enjoys the comfort he brings her. However, at times she does realize the deep needs of those around her, like she does for her father (*McCullers Heart* 101). Additionally, there are times when she independently understands an aspect of human nature, as she does when she contemplates her desire for the violin (*McCullers Heart* 51). Her internal incongruities paired with her external ambiguities do create a grotesque character that her community cannot understand, though the narrator allows a true understanding.

The unifying theme regarding the nature of the grotesque in each of the five main characters revolves around the incongruity of the external to internal. To the townspeople, the characters are undesirables, socially awkward, and uncomfortable to approach. Through the eyes of the narrator, the characters are relatable as representative of a particular aspect of mankind, one that encompasses the incongruities present within all humans. This is due to the novel's honest treatment of each character; the presentation of each character's point of view is a tool to

show how characters that appear to be misfits to the townspeople are actually relatable. The reason that many critics argue against the factors qualifying the characters as grotesque is that the narrator gives a completely different perspective of the characters than that of the town that represents McCullers' South. While the characters do appear to be grotesque to the townspeople, *Heart's* criticism comes as it presents the true humanity of the characters, suggesting that the characters are grotesque because their society has strict expectations for social decorum that they do not follow.

### ***The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter as a Southern Gothic Novel***

Now, since *Heart* has been shown to critique the injustices of the southern culture, and since the characters' social incongruities have been explained, a final element that determines the novel's placement as Southern Gothic is the inclusion of grotesque events and details in the novel. Oliver Evans denies the label of "Southern Gothic" for McCullers' novel, arguing, "It is not because Mrs. McCullers is indulging a taste for the freakish that she causes Singer, in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, to be a deaf-mute... To call Mrs. McCullers' work Gothic is to misuse the term, for Gothic horror is horror for its own sake" ("The Case" 127). His diction works against his argument because he stipulates that "Gothic *horror* is horror for its own sake" ("The Case" 127 emphasis mine). *Heart* is not a horror novel. It is not an overtly bloody book, but it is a socially uncomfortable book. Additionally, labeling McCullers as Southern Gothic author does not imply that she 'indulges' herself with writing the novel. Such statements rely on incorrect ideas regarding the style, and a proper view of the style allows the categorization of *Heart* as Southern Gothic.

In addition to the grotesque qualities of the five main characters in the novel, there are surrounding elements that contribute to the novel's association with the Southern Gothic form.

Although there are numerous small details that together show the novel as Southern Gothic, three larger elements in particular are enough to show the novel's classification as a Southern Gothic novel. These elements are the figure of Antonapoulos, Willie Copeland's abuse in jail, and Singer's suicide.

The narrator introduces Antonapoulos in the very first chapter and describes him as "an obese and dreamy Greek," and he is deaf and mute like Singer (*Heart* 3). He is Singer's dear friend, who contents himself to look upon Antonapoulos as a wise and gentle man (Hise 10). Singer's love for Antonapoulos comes from his own desperate need for belonging because in Antonapoulos he finds someone he can relate to in terms of their handicap. The reality is that Antonapoulos is selfish and gluttonous; the narrator describes his habits of urinating in public, stealing (particularly food), and intentionally bumping into people on the street "whose faces did not please him" (McCullers *Heart* 8). Antonapoulos enjoys a "certain solitary secret pleasure," which presumably refers to masturbation (McCullers *Heart* 4, Saxton 107). His personality is the first described in the novel, which establishes him as the ultimate grotesque character of the book for comparison with the other characters introduced afterwards.

Antonapoulos does not show Singer the same affection that Singer shows him, and Singer never knows exactly how much of his sign language Antonapoulos really understands, but he chooses to not think about it (McCullers *Heart* 5). Later in the novel, after Antonapoulos is committed to an insane hospital, Singer visits and showers gifts upon him, so many that Singer believes he looks like a king, but Antonapoulos only shows excitement for the gifts, not for Singer (McCullers *Heart* 220-222). Singer's glorification of Antonapoulos is climactically revealed through his pyramid dream, in which he places Antonapoulos at the very top of the pyramid, over all the people he knows (McCullers *Heart* 217).

Since Singer is the central character of the novel and all the characters revolve around him, there lies a great irony in the fact that the most respected character in the novel worships the most disgusting character. To the four characters, Singer is the symbol of truth and goodness (McCullers *Heart* 195, 340-341). Antonapoulos is the symbol of selfishness and greed. Because Singer is the center of the novel, and his idol is Antonapoulos, the story ultimately hinges upon the overtly grotesque character of Antonapoulos, further reinforcing the novel's place as Southern Gothic.

Willie Copeland's abuse in jail is the second major grotesque element in the novel, as the abuse is bloody and horrific. Willie and two other black boys are punished in jail by being tied upside-down in an ice-cold room with their feet in the air, and after three days and nights, their feet are so damaged that they have to be amputated (McCullers *Heart* 253-255). The novel treats this terrible event as gently as possible for by not telling this event in real time, allowing the event to be a part of the story without the element of disgust. It happens out of the scene, like the revelation of violent acts in Greek tragedy, and Portia is the messenger that comes in and relays to Dr. Copeland what has happened.

Not only is the event very horrible, but since the boys are black and hated by their white jailers, their punishment is beyond what they truly deserve. Due to the daily abuse they endure, one of Willie's friends talks back to the jailers just once, and then his other friend tries to escape (McCullers *Heart* 254). Even though Willie does not commit any wrongdoing, he is guilty just for being their friend. The severity of the punishment is far too great for the offense, as all three boys could die from the abuse, and the inclusion of this horrific event in the novel further shows the novel's placement as Southern Gothic.

Singer's suicide operates as the third major grotesque event of the novel. Similar to Willie's abuse, Singer's suicide is not described in detail as a bloody event, but the narrator says very simply that "he brought out a pistol from his pocket and put a bullet in his chest" (McCullers *Heart* 326). Even the verbs here, "brought out" and "put," are as gentle as possible so that the event is not indulgently bloody. The event itself is horrific enough, and the fact that Singer kills himself in the room that he rents from Mick's family further increases the horror. Mick is the one who discovers him, and she witnesses the "blood all over his neck" (McCullers *Heart* 352). Singer commits suicide because Antonapoulos has died, and the shock of the fact that Singer would kill himself over such a man shows the depth of the hold that Antonapoulos had on him. The event shows the depth of Singer's loneliness and his contingency of his life's purpose on his relationship with the Antonapoulos. The scene adequately confirms the placement of the novel as Southern Gothic.

### **Conclusion**

While nodding to traditional gothic elements, McCullers further grows the definition of Southern Gothic by putting her own style to the form. McCullers' disgust for racism, corrupt capitalism, and prejudices and misjudgments toward fellow man based on external factors typified itself in *Heart*. Her desire for social reform inspired her to write the novel as set in her present day, shown by the subtle historical hints within the novel. By presenting the characters as relatable, yet rejected by a prejudiced society, *Heart* communicates that social misfits are just misunderstood, though quite human, too. The figure of Antonapoulos, the racial abuse, and Singer's suicide assure the novel's position as Southern Gothic. The horrors presented through McCullers' Southern Gothic style correspond to the horrors she observed in her home region of

the South, and her intimate knowledge of southern culture allowed her to present a true picture of the realities lingering in her home region.

Chapter 3: The Armor against Oppression:  
Racial Identity in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

The formation of identity occurs in large part from the social structure in which people live and where they understand themselves fitting within it. *Heart* deals with the structure of the southern society and the manner by which this structure categorizes its inhabitants. One main social structure in the South that informs the understanding of identity is the division between white culture and African-American culture. The roots of this divide are well known; however, the evolution of the interrelations between these two cultures has been both delicate and bloody, and the attempt to track this path, though not fruitless, cannot begin to ‘define’ the history. One discernible factor in this history is the inclusion of particular pieces of literature in the reformation of the cultural divide. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* presents a way to view the African-American culture as valuable and relatable, and McCullers’ honest treatment of this culture shamed those in southern society that attempted to define the identity of African Americans as morally and intellectually inferior.

As a Southern Gothic piece of literature, *Heart* exposes corruption in the South, and one of those corruptions is racism. Nancy Rich identifies human rights as the focus of the novel, often overshadowed by the more obvious themes of “adolescence, isolation, loneliness, and love” (“Carson McCullers...” 205). While the novel deals with these themes and the way in which these elements are a struggle in the lives of the characters, it also shows how an incorrect value for humanity and life itself often is the root of these struggles. One way these incorrect values manifest is through racism. Laurie Champion writes, “McCullers provides a vivid portrait of the plight of the American Negro living in the South during the thirties, but in the end this theme underlies her more significant theme: all individuals are lonely hunters—blacks, whites,



children adolescents, freaks, and the ‘ordinary’” (48). *Heart* expresses the common nature of humanity’s longings in order to decelerate racist thought, and, to work toward that same goal, the novel celebrates uniqueness among humanity. McCullers’ character Dr. Copeland and his family signify the novel’s theme of the injustices of racism by reflecting realistic brutalities that African Americans faced, rooting them deeply within southern history.

### **McCullers’ Awareness of Racism**

McCullers’ work arises from her passion for humanity as *Heart* seeks to reveal the incongruity of treating people wickedly only because they are different. The novel presents this irrationality, as Adams suggests that *Heart* engages with “racial bigotry” and “recognizes—in the gaps between characters’ longings and the suffering they endure—the queer inconsistencies and excesses at the center of the social order that contain the possibility for its refashioning” (553-554). While the novel critiques society, it also seeks to reform southern society by representing misunderstood people. Instead of lecturing its audience, *Heart* expresses the emotions intensifying within the five isolated characters that stem from social injustice, such as Blount’s rage over economic inequality or Copeland’s disgust towards discrimination (McCullers *Heart* 74, 152). The passions and frustrations of the characters call for an exposure of the atrocities in society. Although McCullers was not necessarily exposed to physical attacks on African Americans as she grew up, she expresses that she saw “the brutal humiliation of human dignity which is even worse” (*Illumination and Night Glare* 62). She believed that racism leads to the mistreatment of all individual human souls, isolated and demeaned, not just African Americans.

The original fountain of racist thought, McCullers would argue, stems from a question of identity: “When the question ‘Who am I?’ recurs and is unanswered, then fear and frustration

project a negative attitude. The bewildered soul can answer only: 'Since I do not understand 'Who I am,' I only know what I am *not*.' The corollary of this emotional incertitude is snobbism, intolerance and racial hate" (*Mortgaged Heart* 260). To define identity by comparing one person's traits to those of others brings forth prideful conclusions. McCullers recognized that when white Southerners did not know their own identity, they sometimes prided themselves just on not being black. This twisted sense of identity would communicate to African Americans that they should be ashamed of their identity, and *Heart* expresses that they should not.

McCullers interacted with many artists in New York who also sought to reform racist thought. Her experiences in New York helped to refine her own views on the South. Rich compares her stance on racism to that of Zora Neale Hurston and Jessie Fauset: "Both Hurston and Fauset were noted for their unorthodox approach to racial problems. They did not, like many writers of social protest, sensationalize the 'crime'; they minimized racial differences and stressed racial pride. McCullers does too. The subject of Dr. Copeland's sermons in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is pride and human dignity" ("Carson McCullers..." 206). Here, Rich argues that *Heart's* criticism of racism concentrates on the reality that people are essentially similar to one another. McCullers emphasizes the importance of taking pride in one's own race for its uniqueness, not superiority. This style is a positivist style, like Hurston and Fauset's, which focuses more on the humanity of African Americans and the richness of their culture than on the horrors of white supremacists, although the latter is still apparent. McCullers' utilization of this style stands out because she is a white author, so her method of reflecting the style of African-American authors aligns with McCullers' argument that the African-American community deserves admiration.

Furthermore, political activists in New York and current events influenced McCullers. Nancy Rich suggests that McCullers had heard of A. Philip Randolph's plan to march to Washington through the circles with which she associated in New York. Randolph had been discussing his plan since the mid-to-late thirties, which was during a time when McCullers was in New York ("Carson McCullers..." 206). It is also possible, as Rich suggests, that McCullers adapted a true story of two young African-American men, Shropshire and Barnes, who lost their feet in jail under very similar circumstances as Willie and his friends ("Carson McCullers..." 207). Another writer, Paul Green, used this event in his own play, and McCullers was likely to have known of the play. Rich explains: "Green dramatized the ugliness of man's inhumanity to man, while McCullers exposed an even worse horror, the fact that many Southerners did not even recognize inhumanity when they saw it" ("Carson McCullers..." 208). In Willie's life, *Heart* highlights the inhumane treatment that white culture too often ignored, even though the situations presented actually happened. The novel gives an understanding of Willie's family, showing the situation from an African-American perspective in order to expose the injustice more clearly. McCullers had her eyes open to the world, as she did when she grew up in the South, and she used her understanding to write her novel.

*Heart's* presentation of racism caught the eye of Richard Wright, one of the original reviewers of the novel, and he identified the racial themes, noting:

To me the most impressive aspect of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in the Southern fiction, to handle Negro characters with as much ease and justice as those of her own race. This cannot be accounted for stylistically or politically; it seems to stem from an attitude toward life which enables Miss McCullers to rise above the pressures of her environment and

embrace white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness.

(“Inner Landscape” 18)

Wright’s review emphasizes McCullers’ appreciation for the African-American community. He also remarks on his surprise that she could treat her black characters the same way as her white characters. Upon hearing this praise, McCullers was shocked by the possibility that because she was white, it was plausible that she “lost sight of the gradations of respectability and prestige within the [Negro] race” (64). She was appalled that such possibilities exist, and indeed, *Heart*’s criticism aims at, essentially, those possibilities.

### **The Unique History of the South and the Racial Problems Resulting**

*Heart* interacts with the stiffness of southern cultural traditions and asks the South to separate from its racist history and progress into a society that appreciates individuality. The deep roots of the southern culture lie in a history that stands out from the rest of America. Their formation was unique in part because of their practice of slavery in combination with ideal topography, which lent the region to focus on farming and the agrarian lifestyle. Hugh Holman explains in his book on southern history that the South in the early nineteenth century was developing a “distinctive regional nature” which they hoped to lead them to “the good life” (Holman 2). Not only did the South enjoy weather that produced good crops and utilize slave labor to reduce overhead, but Holman discusses how Southerners also considered “politics and law as the highest reaches of a culture,” and they lived on a system of honor that valued “good manners and gracious living” (2). These values, combined with their economic system, created a distinct social structure that further grew in the years before the Civil War, developing further into the culture that McCullers lived in.

The South's defeat in the Civil War is a key aspect that distinguishes the uniqueness of the southern culture. This by no means refers only to the submission they had to accept in 1865, but refers also to the Reconstruction period subsequent to their defeat. C. Vann Woodward describes how, in contrast to the South, America as a nation had developed a perception that her values would always prevail. America had never lost a war, and this led many Americans to develop a confidence that "American ideals, values, and principles inevitably prevail in the end;" these successes gave Americans the subconscious impression that they were "somehow immune from the forces of history" (63-64). After the Civil War, the South could no longer share this impression, and as Reconstruction took hold and the rest of America continued to harbor these ideals, the South become more hardened to the surrounding nation. Woodward describes this process:

[The South] had learned what it was to be faced with economic, social, and political problems that refused to yield to all the ingenuity, patience, and intelligence that a people could bring to bear upon them. It had learned to accommodate itself to conditions that it swore it would never accept and it had learned the taste left in the mouth by the swallowing of one's own words. It had learned to live for long decades in quite un-American poverty, and it had learned the equally un-American lesson of submission. (65)

The Civil War not only separated a country within itself for the period of the war, it created a enemy within its borders. The South made the North an enemy among comrades, which led to further separation that created a subculture of American people who did not share the same values as the rest of the nation and had learned to live in self-sufficiency and independent thought. The South clung to its traditions, and this prospect made *Heart's* aim of softening the South all the more difficult.

The South's collective defeat and submission allowed and caused Southerners to create an internal bond that continually disassociates the region from the rest of the nation. Subjugation created a mutual hatred for the North that further united the South. The experience of the South, as the Civil War created distrust among Southerners, created in the South a bond analogous to that of African Americans, though far less strong. Slavery formed and fortified the bond among African Americans, and the African-American culture holds together in ways that other ethnic groups in America have not experienced and cannot understand. For this reason, African Americans still share a sense of community that cannot be broken, and *Heart* does not seek to break it, but it instead celebrates this culture and encourages the white community to do the same.

During Reconstruction, the South refused to seek progress and fought to maintain segregation. White culture wanted to regulate the African-American community in order to nurture a divide. This led to the creation of the Jim Crow laws. McGill discusses various clauses meant to disqualify African Americans from the rights of citizenship. He explains, "To permit the Negro to attain the rights of citizenship was against southern principles and that to argue the contrary was to be disloyal to the South. White supremacy, said the political leaders, depended on white unity" (McGill 219). In the mind of white Southerners, the best South was one that consisted of "two separate societies existing side by side for the protection of each.' Segregation was 'best' for both. The Negro was 'happier' with it. The old customs, 'proved by experience,' were best. And, anyway, they were a part of legend, custom, and tradition" (McGill 219-220). McGill expresses here that the white Southerners believed in the traditions of the past, regardless of the fact that their right to practice those traditions was no longer in existence. The South could

not enslave African Americans, so they did the next ‘best’ thing: segregated them, and this society of segregation is the one that McCullers grew up in and analyzed in the novel.

From the influence of slavery, African Americans experienced persecution from the government during the Great Depression as they denied them economic aid. However, the outrage amongst African Americans arose because whites of their same income level received aid when they did not (McElvaine 81). Blacks often wrote to the president but kept their names anonymous for fear of retaliation from local government; they wrote to tell him how the government workers treated them. They expected that the President did not truly know because they respected him and trusted that he would not allow their mistreatment if he was aware, and Mr. and Mrs. Roosevelt did their best to send aid in response (McElvaine 58, 69, 81). Many of those suffering, not just African Americans, asked for clothes since they were too ill-clothed to work, or they could not clothe their children for them to go to school (McElvaine 69). These situations affected the day-to-day lives of African Americans during the Great Depression, and they influenced the rage and despair that they often felt during the time that McCullers lived.

In order to survive the Great Depression, African Americans flocked to farm, labor, and service professions. Over 60% of African-American women in 1940 worked in service professions (maid, nanny, etc.), just as McCullers’ character, Portia, works for the Kelly’s boardinghouse (Niemi 174). White Southerners felt comfortable and familiar with the African Americans’ work situation. In the service industry, whites saw African Americans where they were accustomed to seeing them, doing the same work as they had when they were slaves. Whites could ignore the reality of their equality because the visual was the same. Therefore, as African Americans sought professions outside of the service industry, the white community was aggravated and they saw the society as disrupted. Donaldson remarked, “For white women to

step off the pedestal, for black women to take off their aprons, was to shake the very foundation of white Southern culture” (572). Taking off the apron, for black women, metaphorically refers to putting themselves in the public eye, making themselves known, and making themselves a peer to a white woman. As McCullers wrote *Heart*, African Americans sought to break themselves out of their typical roles and highlight their equality with white people.

While the South clung to as much of their past as possible by segregating and mistreating the African-American community, the rest of America sought progress, and the outside nation began a necessary process of self-examination. This movement came between the two World Wars as an effort to ensure that progress moved toward something positive, as Woodward describes, “There occurred the most thoroughgoing inquest of self-criticism that our national economy has ever undergone...on the whole the people regarded it as a productive of good. It was at least indicative of a healthy and self-confident society, uninhibited by fear” (69). Woodward describes the dedication to just and honest systems in which Americans held governments, companies, and churches alike to close scrutiny. In part, the Great Depression made this movement necessary. Americans lost some trust in their authorities, and citizens wanted to take matters into their own hands. The results of this movement were court cases, fines, and the promise that America would keep its eye on those associated with corruption. Such a movement of self-examination created an ideal sounding board for *Heart* in the North, where it proved to be quite successful, but the South was not quite on board with the movement, and McCullers still had to work toward softening them before she could change them.

Although the South was not as interested in this movement, it felt pressure from the rest of the nation to progress. As Southerners realized that the rest of America considered their values outdated, they began to feel vulnerable, as if they were “encircled and menaced from all sides”



(Woodward 73). Instead of being receptive to the changes taking place in America, “The South developed a suspicious inhospitality toward the new and the foreign, a tendency to withdraw from what it felt to be a critical world” (Woodward 73). Instead of seeing America’s progress and joining, they shut themselves in from the rest of the nation, which they believed threatened their social structure. In order to protect the South, Southerners hardened themselves to a “forceful exclusion of criticism from outside” (Woodward 73). They began to make very clear that the segregated system that Americans wanted to scrutinize was the very system they praised and most admired. The South sought to cling to the individuality that made them frightened of their northern neighbors and, in fear of losing themselves, rejected influence from the outside world, making McCullers’ fight not one just against segregation, but against a way of life that Southerners felt defined their society.

However, after 100 years of Reconstruction, historians Hugh Holman and Ralph McGill could both confidently express the promising sense of shame and guilt that loomed over Southerners. Holman writes, “This sense of the past, this sense that what has gone before has stripped from the inhabitants of the region a substantial portion of their own freedom to act, has given the South in our time a view of *the meaning of life* that is darkened by a sense of shame and deepened by the tragic awareness of human failure and of pain” (3-4 emphasis mine). Holman emphasizes the shame that lingers from the subjugation of the South and the forced submission that the South experienced, suggesting that this shame threatened their very feeling of purpose, as their subjugation denied their independence. McGill emphasizes another similar shame:

The more sensitive Southerner often is self-embarrassed by a realization that he has accepted unquestioningly some aspect of his community life which he rejects. The

Southerner suffers, too, from having estranged himself from much of the life about him. Segregation is estrangement. It is a withdrawal from humanity that is close at hand, that passes in the streets, that lives just over the way. Life in separate, side-by-side compartments, as events of the last half of the twentieth century already have demonstrated with such devastating emphasis, is productive of results both explosive and tragic. This is a part of the guilt and accusation that make up the mosaic of Southern conscience. (218)

In addition to the shame of racism and segregation, McGill alludes to the shame of the South from knowing that they sought to separate themselves from America. After the conflicts of the two World Wars, the South began to realize that their own desires, for “separate, side-by-side compartments,” were similar to the desires that spurred these wars. McGill is referring to the explosion of hatred from Nazi Germany to the Jews that stemmed from an intense devaluing of human life. In essence, he compares the South’s desires to the racism that spurred the wars. In a way, the horrific events around the world gave the South a realistic picture of racism’s effects and allowed for the softening of the South and the *possibility* of progress. Upon the hope of this softening, McCullers began to write *Heart* and seek to reform the South’s relentless racism. Through the novel’s presentation of African-American characters, it both celebrates the black community and affords an opportunity for white Southerners to see the humanity of African Americans and the important role they were already fulfilling in society.

### **Dr. Copeland and His Family**

*Heart*’s southern mill town presents white Southerners who enjoy flaunting their race over African Americans. To illustrate the racist setting, Dr. Copeland briefly describes the many occasions when white people would drive by him as he walked and shout out to him with

commands, mocking him. Dr. Copeland would “walk on with the dignity in him and be silent” (McCullers *Heart* 84). Even though he is an educated, well-mannered man, white men still mock him for his color. The novel highlights the racism of the town by presenting Dr. Copeland’s side of town as whole subdivision. Constante Groba discusses this detail: “It is the geography of exclusion, with the racialized marking of spaces, that best characterizes the segregated South” (“So Far...” 66). The town segregates not only because the whites hate the blacks, but now, after the events of southern history, the black community is bitter from their mistreatment and wish to stay away; they have a general disdain for white people, as shown by Dr. Copeland’s intense hatred for white men (McCullers *Heart* 91). The tension between the two races is heavy, and the novel does not seek to hide the bitterness but instead exposes it.

Dr. Copeland is not a picture of the typical abused African American. His isolation comes, in many ways, from his obsessions regarding the state of the African-American people. Although he fights for the betterment of his people, his community does not understand him (Groba “So Far...” 66-67). Dr. Copeland asks his community to rise up to intellectual betterment through strength and tenacity when they wish to rise through religious piety. Groba explains, “The heaven of freedom that he preaches for the black race must be achieved not through prayer of conformity, but through pride, fierce struggle and the assertion of one’s dignity” (“So Far...” 67). Dr. Copeland’s passion is for his people to fight, not with fists, but with intellect. He urges his family to reject “the yoke of submission and slothfulness” (McCullers *Heart* 80). He calls for his people to educate themselves and live dignified, hard-working lives. He feels that living in subjugation for the sake of ‘getting by’ is wrong, and his constant lecturing causes his community to withdraw from him. He believes that “the whole Negro race [is] sick” because they allow themselves to be servants (McCullers *Heart* 81). The passion forms into him “a black,

terrible Negro feeling,” and he must fight to keep himself calm (McCullers *Heart* 81). Although his passion comes from a deep pride in his identity, the novel reveals that his ideals, in reality, reject the culture he claims to value.

The action that Dr. Copeland proposes requires an abandonment of African-American culture. Groba explains: “His purported concern for the members of his race is tarnished by the egocentric mongolism of one who sees everything through the prism of an individual obsession. He insists upon imposing his atheism and his asceticism on his children and decides what each of them is going to be in life” (“So Far...” 67). His single-mindedness not only blinds him to the true needs of his children, but also to the traditions of his culture. His plans would mean the denial of their music, food, dialect, community, family values, and personal characteristics, as evidenced by the way he sought to raise his own children to deny these things (McCullers *Heart* 80). However, Portia makes a point to tell her father how she, her husband, and her siblings live in the tradition of their culture (McCullers *Heart* 77-78). Groba points out, “It is Portia who openly questions her father’s totalitarian insistence on black racial purity, a rigid asceticism and an obsessive submission to abstractions which are, ultimately, the opposite of life-affirming. He wants to be ‘pure Negro,’ but his daughter favors the word ‘coloured’” (“So Far...” 68). Dr. Copeland has completely distanced himself from the characteristics of the black community. His ideals are exclusive from the values of black culture. In essence, because whites mock the way in which blacks live, Copeland decides that they must live proud, dignified, and stoic lives in order to rise in reputation and power. He wishes for his people to *change*, believing that it will change their situation, as well. He does not wish for a community of like-minded individuals between whites and blacks, but he wishes to persuade his community to be like him and follow his ideals, which he believes would make their rise inevitable.

Although Dr. Copeland does not appreciate the idiosyncrasies of his community, his racial pride manifests itself in terms of his grounding in black history. He looks over the whole of the history of his people and sees how his people have progressed from generation to generation:

My people were brought from the great plains, and the dark, green jungles...On the long chained journeys to the coast they died by the thousands. Only the strong survived.

Chained in the foul ships that brought them here they died again. Only the hardy Negroes with will could live. Beaten and chained and sold on the block, the least of these strong ones perished again. And finally through the bitter years the strongest of my people are still here. Their sons and daughters, their grandsons and great grandsons. (McCullers *Heart* 119)

Although Portia feels that her father does not feel any connection to the black community's tradition, he feels a connection to the part of their history that relates to him: strength. He fears that his people have left this strength and given in to employment by white people, which he sees as a form of submission, in order to survive. His main hope is that his people will rise and regain their strength, not in brute force, but in the strength of the mind.

Dr. Copeland's ideals show when he rejects Lancey Davis' letter about destroying white people (McCullers *Heart* 183). This is not what Dr. Copeland wants, and he sees that idea as senseless. He wishes for his people to become a highly educated community full of respected leaders. He recognizes one cause of his people's poverty as the over-excess of children to care for, and he urges his patients to use birth control so they only give birth to children they can provide for. He says, "It is not more children we need but more chances for the ones already on the earth" (McCullers *Heart* 74). He reasons that this would allow his people to have the money

for their material needs and to pay for education. However, his community values family and sees children as a great blessing, as shown when they continually have more children despite his warnings (McCullers *Heart* 74). He sees his own children as new members of society that he aims to make just like him, not as a blessing to celebrate. This illustrates one disconnect between Dr. Copeland's values and the values of his community.

Constantly upon Dr. Copeland's mind is his fight for African Americans of his town. His people are his mission, and as he watches them suffer medically, he urges them to take measures to take care of themselves. However, he is guilty of not caring for his own medical needs. He has tuberculosis, but his passion for his people is so strong that he does not rest or take time to care for himself (McCullers *Heart* 140). As his patients ignore his advice regarding birth control, the result is death, as shown later in the novel, because of the lack of proper care. He thinks about the loss of five patients: "the blame was in the long years of want which lay behind. The diets of cornbread and sowbelly and syrup, the crowding of four and five persons to a single room. The death of poverty" (McCullers *Heart* 252). He longs to aid his people, but he is helpless when fighting against a culture and a society that disadvantages them; the culture desires children, but the white society holds resentment toward his people and refuses to help alleviate hunger. This combination leads to an overflow of undernourished people.

As shown above, a strong bond for kinship is an important characteristic of the black community, and Dr. Copeland does not share this same level of value. Of course, he loves his family, but his extreme passions keep him from loving them for who they are and instead spur his wish for them to be like him, ultimately leading to his alienation from his family. Without the ties to family, he has lost his relational ties with the rest of the community, too. His sons are afraid of him, and Portia is angry or distraught after every encounter with him. In raising his

children, he sought for them to grow in pride and dignity, but “Daisy was teaching the children the cult of meekness” (McCullers *Heart* 81). He had a plan for the children, and he recalls, “This feeling of real true purpose for them was so strong that he knew exactly how each thing should be with them” (McCullers *Heart* 80). He wished to form the children into the shape he wished them to be (McCullers *Heart* 78). For this, his wife left him because he was so full of bitterness and rage that she took the children, and has since died.

The reality that angers him the most is that his children allow themselves to be under the employment of white people instead of devoting themselves to study and discipline in order to rise in power. Laurie Champion explains, “He fights against everything his children become—subservient, uneducated, and passive reactors against racism” (48). His children live completely opposite to the way he does, and they have instead come to tolerate the place given to them by white people. As Copeland watches his children, “the sight of their faces made a black swollen feeling in him. If once he could tell it all to them, from the far-away beginning until this very night, the telling would ease the sharp ache in his heart. But they would not listen or understand” (McCullers *Heart* 148). The feeling that his communications are useless deeply affects his emotional state. His own children do not understand what he teaches, and they ultimately do not understand him. His heart wishes for a better life for his children, but his actions communicate to them that he sees them only as tools for the betterment of the African-American position.

Ultimately, McCullers demonstrates the futility of Dr. Copeland’s ideals when he goes to the courthouse and seeks justice for the crippling of his son, but the jailers beat him and throw him in jail, despite the fact that he lives a stoic, dignified life. The white community does not recognize him for being dignified, as even Biff, an observer, recognizes him only as a long-time doctor, not for any way he lives (McCullers *Heart* 23). His efforts to live a dignified life make no

difference to the white community, and his self-reform of his identity ends up futile. Dr. Copeland believes that his, and his community's, equality will be granted if they deserve it, but his mistreatment shows how it will not.

*Heart* not only presents Dr. Copeland as a dignified, prideful man who acts only in non-physical ways, but it also shows how he grows over the course of the novel. The event of Willie's crippling and Dr. Copeland's own treatment by police change the way Dr. Copeland feels towards social change. He makes this speech to Blount:

For half a century I thought it wise to be patient...In the face of brutality I was prudent. Before injustice I held my peace. I sacrificed the things in hand for the good of the hypothetical whole. I believed in the tongue instead of the fist. As an armor against oppression I taught patience and faith in the human soul. I know now how wrong I was. I have been a traitor to myself and to my people. All that is rot. Now is the time to act and to act quickly...By getting out and doing things. By calling crowds of people together and getting them to demonstrate...In August of this year I plan to lead more than one thousand Negroes in this county on a march. A march to Washington. (McCullers *Heart* 301-303)

This speech is a picture of the change that a brutal society can make on an individual. Although Dr. Copeland once thought that intellect and reason could change his position in society, after the injustice his family goes through, he realizes he can no longer rely on white people to listen and agree. He realizes he must make them listen. No longer does he believe in the goodness of "the human soul," but he now realizes that action, though not violent, must be the course for his people.



Dr. Copeland's ideals offer a picture of an overwhelming obsession, but they also offer a possibility for the kind of action it may take to change society. Eileen Barrett outlines this point:

Through her characterization of the black southern Dr. Copeland, the white, middle-class McCullers conveys personal and ideological struggles from the Depression-era movement for economic and racial justice. In fact, the relationship between Copeland and union organizer Jake Blount elucidates historical tensions among communism, Black Nationalism, and Black Christianity that played a significant role in the emerging Civil Rights Movement. (219)

Barrett argues that Dr. Copeland's ideals offer a picture of the struggles that many oppressed people experience and the resulting plans that they make to change their situation. *Heart* offers the impression that Dr. Copeland may not be far off base from putting forth such plans. He models himself after Karl Marx, whose goal, as Dr. Copeland explains in his Christmas party speech, was "to make all human beings equal and to divide the great wealth of the world so that there would be no poor or rich and each person would have his share" (McCullers *Heart* 188). Dr. Copeland reminds his people: "We are not alone in this slavery. There are millions of others throughout the world, of all colors and races and creeds" (McCullers *Heart* 191). He expresses a wish to unify all oppressed people, just as he expresses when he meets with Blount. In this way, the novel shows his personal progression and essentially encourages Southerners to progress toward better ideals, as well.

One main aspect that makes Dr. Copeland's idealism a possible representation of McCullers' own is his plan to march to Washington. As explained, it is possible that McCullers knew of A. Philip Randolph's plans, so by having Dr. Copeland make these same plans, she is presenting him as a positive figure. Groba asserts:

He may be insensitive, dogmatic and egotistical to a certain degree, but he offers a strategy for African Americans to resist an oppressive society that is in most ways more valid than the meekness defended by Portia. In spite of their imbalances and mistakes, people like Copeland are the ones who change the world, a world that at some junctures needs non-conformists more than preservers. (“So Far...” 70)

This need for non-conformists is one way in which *Heart* celebrates the diversity of those deemed ‘social outcasts.’ At certain points in history, people like Dr. Copeland can change the world because they refuse to conform to corrupt society.

The tragedy of Dr. Copeland’s character is his lack of redemption. At the end of the novel, he looks back on his life and sees “no work of lasting value” (McCullers *Heart* 331). He has huge plans for his people, but because he ignores his health, he cannot act upon them. He ends up needing to go to the country to live out the rest of his days surrounded by a family that does not understand him. He is still determined, though feeling weak and ill from the moment they depart for the country, that he will return home shortly (McCullers *Heart* 335). The passion inside is not stilled. He longs to tell what is in his heart, but “there was no one to hear him” (McCullers *Heart* 336). After a lifetime of service for his community, he dies unsuccessful.

### **Conclusion**

The bleakness of Dr. Copeland’s ending is representative of the bleakness McCullers sees in the future if people do not take action to change the situation of racism. *Heart* laments the mistreatment of African Americans because it identifies their humanity and expresses appreciation for the diversity and richness of their culture. The novel is a call to rise from apathy and subservience. Dr. Copeland, though obsessed and single-minded, shows how passion can often bring forth an ideal leader.

## Chapter 4: The Gods of the Hunters:

Spiritual Identity in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

At the core of McCullers' writing is the theme of spiritual isolation. *Heart* explores within the characters their overwhelming need to fill their inner void and create an identity. McCullers wrote in her essay "Loneliness...An American Malady" that the nature of loneliness is "essentially...a quest for identity" (*Mortgaged Heart* 259). She discusses how man is driven by the need to "claim his identity and belong"; essentially, she argues that man has a gap that must be filled by social identity and belonging (*Mortgaged Heart* 259). This "belonging" can be anything—a community, a career, a family, etc.—but it must be a place where a person feels wanted and understood. The two needs of identity and belonging depend upon each other. Until man claims his identity, he cannot find his place in society, but finding a place in society advances the discovery of identity. *Heart* shows five characters struggling with the inability to find identity or belonging in relation to their community, and the characters instead create their own self-formulated identity and purpose by constructing idealistic goals that become their gods.

The five characters that the novel portrays strive to cope with life in a society that rejects them. When Dr. Copeland, Brannon, Blount and Mick each meet John Singer, they are drawn to him because of his blindness to race, gender, or class. Singer's acceptance of the four characters and his willingness to listen offer a source of belonging to the other four characters. They elevate him to this idea of a wise, self-sufficient man who they feel connects them to their personal gods. Patricia Hise discusses this in her dissertation, saying, "The novel clearly indicates that McCullers' attitude is that the human condition of life is a lonely one that the individual struggles to escape through self-expression and an attempt to establish a connection between himself and something larger than himself—often a "something" he creates" (Hise 17). The five main

characters each have created their surrogate god in which to place all their devotion and through which they find their identity; for Mick, Biff, Blount, and Copeland, they find in Singer a mediator through which they can connect to their gods.

Before detailing the god that each character has created, it is important to make a note on the theme of unrequited love in the novel and to show how it relates to spiritual identity. Evans writes on the novel's theme of love, "...in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, all of them strive for release through love, but with each of them love takes a different form, the form determined by the nature of the lover" ("The Theme" 337). Evans suggests that *Heart* presents a picture of five people who deeply love something that is self-glorified based their own values and nature, and for Singer particularly, it is a person. This search for love is not a romantic quest; it is the characters' need to fill a relational gap in their lives. The characters fill this gap with an idol or god that they can worship and adore. McCullers explains, "Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about—people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love—their spiritual isolation" (McCullers *Mortgaged Heart* 274). Although the grotesqueness of the characters at first may overwhelm their characterization, it is a symptom of their internal void and isolation. Evans summarizes, "Love is the machinery by which men strive to escape from their cells" ("The Theme" 334). Evans suggests that the characters in *Heart* feel the need to find love in order to feel some connection to something beyond themselves. However, because they are unable to make a connection to a person (even including Singer because Antonapoulos does not show reciprocation), they create an ideal or a goal into which they can funnel all their love and dedication and by which they believe they will ultimately fulfill their purpose as human beings.

When analyzing the spiritual identity of the main characters in *Heart*, McCullers quickly identifies that Biff, Mick, Blount, and Copeland do not associate with organized religion. As previously noted, McCullers herself distrusted traditional religious practices of the South, particularly Southern Baptist traditions, but comforted herself with the thought that she emulated the ideal values of Christianity, such as her care for mankind (Carr 115, 194). The four characters who cling to Singer (and even Singer, as shown later in the novel) do not accept the existence of a Christian God. Instead, they each have their own surrogate gods into which they place all their commitment and to which they direct all their worship.

### **A Contemplative Observer**

Biff Brannon grew up going to church, like many southern children, but has since abandoned the practice. His wife is a Sunday school teacher, and though he expresses interest to hear her read scripture aloud, he must remind himself to separate the words from his wife because he rejects the possibility that his wife emulates an ideal Christian (McCullers *Heart* 31). His objection to his wife's character is in her unwillingness to listen to people or pay attention to things outside of herself (McCullers *Heart* 15). However, he recognizes that her problems do not stem from her belief in Christianity and that the values and teachings of Christianity may still be morally right. He feels this way because his mother raised him to attend church, and Biff deeply loves his mother and wears her wedding ring (McCullers *Heart* 15). He feels guilt when he contemplates what his mother would think if she knew he had left religion (McCullers *Heart* 31). At the end of the first chapter in which he appears, he recognizes that "in some men it is in them to give up everything personal at some time, before it ferments and poisons—throw it to some human being or some human idea" (McCullers *Heart* 33). This longing to place one's whole being into a cause, Biff speculates, may be a result of the text "All men seek for Thee" that Alice

read from scripture (McCullers *Heart* 32-33). Biff's openness to the idea of a God that all men seek is the extent of commitment he makes to Christianity. His contemplation about man's desire for religion provides the context for and overshadows his contemplation of Christianity, as shown because he uses the idea of religion to understand humanity instead of valuing religion for its own nature (McCullers *Heart* 33). His curiosity indicates his drive for knowledge rather than a desire for the religion of his wife, or even his mother.

Biff Brannon's god is the accumulation of understanding. While attempting to understand Blount, he connects Blount's need to relate himself impulsively with multiple ethnicities (saying he is a mixture of many different lineages) with the text "All men seek for thee" that his wife read, concluding that both needs are compelled by man's general need for a cause to live for (McCullers *Heart* 33). However, as he contemplates man's need for a cause, he does not recognize that his own goal is to reach an understanding of the nature of man. He strives to ask questions and gather answers in order to have an enlightened understanding of man. He feels that man's most valuable ambition is to observe, as evidenced by his grudge against his wife because she does not step outside her own realm and observe people as he does (McCullers *Heart* 15). When he sees Blount act out in self-aggression, he cannot figure out why Blount did that and thinks, "Maybe if he [Biff] told all the facts out loud he could put his finger on the thing that puzzled him" (McCullers *Heart* 32). In human nature, he finds a pool for questions, and as he watches people, he isolates questions and turns them over until he can answer them. This thirst for understanding is the ideal that stands as his god.

As the quest for understanding is Biff's god, he lives in ritualistic worship of its pursuit. He trains his mind to contemplate all the things he sees with as deep a penetration as he can reach. He methodically observes his café all night every night and watches the customers. He

takes notice of the way people act, like the way they all have one particular part of their body that they especially protect (McCullers *Heart* 29). He stations himself right behind his cash register and makes his “surveys” across the room continually (McCullers *Heart* 30). His ritualistic presence in his café relates to his nature of observing, but the parallel to this methodical survey of the café is his commitment to reading the newspapers. He collects “everything for the past twenty years docketed and outlined and complete” dating back to October, 17, 1918 (McCullers *Heart* 133). He has an entire stock room set apart for holding all the newspapers. His dedication to reading and storing the papers reflects his need to understand and preserve all he sees. This human need to understand overwhelms Biff’s life, and he makes the accumulation of understanding his surrogate god to be the outlet for his dedication.

Although Biff works throughout the novel to come to a better understanding of man, he ultimately finds that this ‘god’ is not redemptive. After Singer’s suicide and after McCullers has shown how Blount, Mick, and Copeland have changed, she then moves to show the change in Biff. At first, as Biff’s final chapter begins, Biff admits the reason he leaves the café open all through the night, saying that he leaves it open for all those who wander in the night and need a place to stop and think in the quiet meditation of the night (McCullers *Heart* 356). However, as the chapter ends, he finds himself rejecting the possibility of true understanding. In an unexplained burst of illumination, he sees both the past and “a future of blackness, error, and ruin” that scares the sense out of him (McCullers *Heart* 359). Instead of embracing the understanding set before him, he sharply turns away (McCullers *Heart* 359). The understanding he seeks for culminates in the reality of the horror that man can and will bring to the world, and this reality terrifies Biff. He is the only character who receives a glimpse of that which he seeks for, but he ultimately rejects it. His worship of understanding leaves him unredeemed as he

realizes the horrors of human life that he cannot face but that he thought he was seeking to understand.

### **An Angry Egalitarian**

Dr. Copeland's relationship to religion is far different from Biff's; Dr. Copeland sees religion as training people for submission and weakness (McCullers *Heart* 80). He has trained his children to believe that "there was no God, but that their lives were holy and for each one of them there was this real true purpose" (McCullers *Heart* 80). Although Copeland believes in the purpose and holiness of each life, he does not acknowledge anything that transmits this holiness or purpose. However, his wife Daisy trained the children otherwise and brought them to church without his approval. She taught them to have joy when he would teach them to be solemn. Because she left him and trained the children on her own, Dr. Copeland's children, Portia and her brothers, grew up involved in the church. They enjoy church because they can connect to the rest of their African-American community through it, but Dr. Copeland thinks that his race is "sick" because they attend church (McCullers *Heart* 81). He laments especially when his father-in-law says to all the family: "[Jesus] will place His holy hand upon our heads and straightaway us will be white as snow" (McCullers *Heart* 146). Copeland rages because his community has come to believe that in order to be eternally holy they must be like white men. His heart is hardened to Christianity because of the impressions he sees sown among his race that he feels discredit the religion.

Instead, Copeland's god is the hope for the rise of a dignified African-American community. He continually works for the betterment of his race. He has discovered the way of truth and purpose, and he feels he can lead his people in this way. He tries to tell his people that they are living a complacent lifestyle because they let themselves work under the employment of



white people; no matter how pleasant their employers may be, Copeland protests, they are still white. His calls for them to rise to a position of dignity, and he continually shares this message. Yet, his people do not acknowledge the truth of his words, and this deeply frustrates him. They may listen, but they do not understand (McCullers *Heart* 197). Paradoxically, he is angry and hardened against his community for their values, but at the same time, he urges them to rise to their rightful position. Copeland does not have community with his people because they do not understand his message, and to him, that is the equivalent of their lack of understanding about his own identity; his message links so fully to his soul that the two are inseparable.

Copeland worships his god by continually spreading the message inside him. Since his medical practice brings him to his whole community, he uses this opportunity to urge his community to become a dignified race. The narrator describes, “He would tell them in simple words, always the same way, and with the years it came to be a sort of angry poem which he had always known by heart” (McCullers *Heart* 74). He has spoken so many times without prevailing that he has come to speak the words methodically. For example, he constantly implores his patients to cease having so many children (McCullers *Heart* 74). Still, even though he urges them repeatedly to reduce the population in order to give their current children a healthy life, his patients continually fail to listen. Even though he constantly deals with frustration and rejection, he continues to tell them. He feels such a burden to show his community the real true purpose, but he works himself beyond exhaustion and cannot even take care of himself. Ultimately, his god leaves him unredeemed because, although he constantly strives, his efforts are fruitless and he can think of “no work of lasting value” out of his life (McCullers *Heart* 331). Because of his tuberculosis, he has to move to his father-in-law’s farm, left to live out the remainder of his days with people who do not understand him or his cause in life.

### **A Silenced Musician**

Mick, like Copeland, does not attend church or believe in God. She tells Portia, “I don’t believe in God any more than I do Santa Claus” (McCullers *Heart* 50). Mick’s comparison of these two beliefs suggests that her adamant disbelief in God may result from her efforts to appear mature. Portia responds to Mick’s statement by saying that Mick reminds her of her father, Dr. Copeland, in the “shape and color of [their] souls” (McCullers *Heart* 50). Portia further explains how Mick and Dr. Copeland each have no peace and have no love for any person, and she explains that she does have these things because she believes in God; she says, “I believe and I have peace” (McCullers *Heart* 50). She reprimands Mick, “This afternoon you going to roam all over the place without never being satisfied. You going to traipse all around like you have to find something lost. You going to work yourself up with excitement. Your heart going to beat hard enough to kill you because you don’t love and don’t have peace” (McCullers *Heart* 51). Portia points out that Mick will never be satisfied because of her lack of peace or love, suggesting that Mick’s chase for a self-made purpose is in vain. Portia cuts to the heart of Mick’s issue, and really Biff, Blount, and Copeland’s too, that they all seek something missing in their lives, and that they seek to fill that emptiness with an abstract ideal.

Mick’s ideal that she creates into a god is music and the quest for her own success as a musician. She lives for the emotions she experiences when she listens to music, and she strives after this feeling by working to become a musician. The narrator describes Mick, “Nearly all the time there was some kind of piano piece or other music going on in the back of her mind” (McCullers *Heart* 35). As Mick sits on the top of an unfinished house and longs to sing, she dreams of becoming a famous composer or musician, and she always thinks about the classical pieces she hears over Mrs. Brown’s radio (McCullers *Heart* 35). Thoughts of music are nearly

always on Mick's mind. Because Mick feels that she has a purpose through her musical goals, this helps to take her mind off her emptiness inside.

The effect of Mick's creation of her surrogate god is the habitual need to worship music and the success she wishes it to bring her. She feels a constant need to practice, and she dedicates herself wholeheartedly to music. For example, she sacrifices her lunch money every day to take piano lessons (McCullers *Heart* 161). Her appetite to learn piano overtakes her practical appetite for food. She also suppresses the human need to protect oneself from physical harm; when she lies on the ground to listen to the radio through the window, she begins to feel a need to hurt herself (McCullers *Heart* 119). The symphony she listens to leaves a "bad hurt in her, and a blankness" which makes her start to physically hurt herself (McCullers *Heart* 119). Part of her anger lies in her inability to remember the tune, and this becomes a deep guilt in her. She cannot stand to fail in her music because it is her whole identity and her whole life's goal. Ultimately, she cannot obtain her dream because of her obligation to take a full-time job at Woolworth's in order to help her family (McCullers *Heart* 351). She asks herself, "What the hell good was it. All the plans she had made, and the music. When all that came of it was this trap—the store, then home to sleep, and back at the store again" (McCullers *Heart* 350). Mick's dream fails her. She has no more hope of ever being able to be a musician because it cannot support her family. Ultimately, she has no redemption from her god, and she loses her purpose and self-made identity.

### **A Fruitless Economist**

Finally, Blount has possibly the most unique and grotesque relationship with Christianity. In the middle of the book, he explains that his first belief was Jesus (McCullers *Heart* 151). He tells Singer, "My mind was on Jesus all day long. In my spare time I studied the

Bible and prayed. Then one night I took a hammer and laid my hand on the table. I was angry and I drove the nail all the way through. My hand was nailed to the table and I looked at it and the fingers fluttered and turned blue” (McCullers *Heart* 151). Blount even shows Singer the “ragged, dead-white scar in the center” (McCullers *Heart* 151). This horrific action reflects Blount’s need to be completely involved in what he believes in. He overflows with passion, as seen by the way the veins of his forehead always throb as he talks to people (McCullers *Heart* 66). He needs to move beyond the possibility of a pious way of life to a passionate, physical belief. His choice to feel Jesus’ pain suggests Blount’s need to experience that which he believes in and to involve himself in the epitome of that belief. In essence, he sought, in the only way he knew how, to be like Christ. Blount does not say how this experience affected him, but instead he simply moves on with his story, suggesting that the event finished his phase in Christianity. Blount likely felt that something miraculous or phenomenal would happen after this experience. Instead, his fingers just began to die as any other man’s would. He is disillusioned by Christianity because he did not rise to some higher level once he achieved the goal he had in mind. After studying many other books, he gradually left Christianity behind, and now that he “knows,” he does not see it as a viable option (McCullers *Heart* 152). When Jake talks about those who “know” he is referring to those who “[see] the world as it is” and see “...that the whole system of the world is built on a lie” (McCullers *Heart* 152). After Jake studies books and experiences more of America, he rages at the injustice he regards in the economic system.

Blount’s new god is the recovery of freedom and the necessity to overthrow the bourgeoisie. He talks constantly about economic inequality. He cannot walk around town without filling with anger for the reality of the workers’ oppression under rich factory owners. At one point, he finds writing on the wall that mesmerizes him because it speaks of the injustice that

also angers him, and he relishes the idea of meeting this person that might share his goal (McCullers *Heart* 159-160). However, both the graffiti writer, who he never meets, and the workers in town, content to live in subjugation, let him down. Blount longs to become involved with people who think like him, and he enjoys talking to Singer because he interprets Singer's silence to be a result of the "knowing" he talks of, and Blount finds a brother in him.

Blount's worship of his god results in him constantly talking to everybody about economic injustice and trying to stir up strikes. He ritualistically rants about his goals and his passions, and as he methodically simmers with rage over injustice, he makes himself drunk to drown his anger. His commitment to freedom follows him wherever he goes. Even more, he always seeks the company of others who "know" (McCullers *Heart* 152). His passion for economic equality is his very heartbeat—physical, methodical, and zealous. This thirst for freedom consumes his life, and he throws himself completely into these ideals, for he can see nothing else to fill his void. Like the other characters, his passion and 'god' ultimately leaves him without redemption. After Singer's suicide, Blount feels hopeless and alone (McCullers *Heart* 342). He had thought that some papers he wrote on injustice would make a difference in the town, but he loses hope when nothing comes of them (McCullers *Heart* 342). In the end, he leaves town, perhaps more lonely than when he came.

### **Singer's Atonement**

Biff, Mick, Dr. Copeland, and Blount all live with deep-set ideals and goals that become their own personal gods. These gods cause them deep pain, but they also give them a deep sense of purpose. To them, this purpose justifies their commitment to their gods; their gods motivate them to endure in spite of the frustrations and isolation they each face. All four characters worship their gods with their whole being and serve them ritualistically and passionately, each in

their own way. When Singer enters their life, he becomes a vessel for them to connect with their goals in a way that brings them peace.

The widespread theory, supported by many critics, that Singer serves as a god or Christ figure (using the two interchangeably) for his four visitors is incomplete. However, the theory can be an adequate starting point, since “his placidity gives him a godlike cast that prompts spectators to project upon him their desire for comfort” (*Mortgaged Heart* 124). Singer’s nature allows others to see him as a god. Critics have noticed this, as Benjamin Saxton suggests, “The characters divinize others in order to create gods of their own making; just as Antonapoulos kneels before the cross, so too does Singer bow to the Greek, the others before Singer, and so on” (107). Saxton alludes here to Singer’s pyramid dream where Singer sits above the four visitors in the pyramid, and Antonapoulos sits above him, and this suggests Singer’s ultimate glorification of Antonapoulos (*McCullers Heart* 217). Saxton further suggests Singer’s inability and unwillingness to serve as a Christ figure and asserts instead that Singer is a “diseased Christ” in that he cannot actually help his followers (105, 107). Robert Brinkmeyer suggests that the characters’ need to have a savior to worship is “not unlike people living under fascist dictatorships” as they are lost in “their own confusions and despair in a fast-changing world” (233). He theorizes that the characters look to Singer as a trustworthy leader that they place at the head of their lives. Laurie Champion also accepts the theory of Singer as a Christ figure and suggests that the theory symbolizes how “spiritual loneliness and human isolation ‘[crucify]’ all members of society” (52). Here, Champion concludes that this image of Singer as a Christ figure illustrates the novel’s symbolism of the suffering of social outcasts.

While this evaluation of Singer as a God figure or a Christ figure is valid, it requires refinement. The connotations of a “God figure” are far different from those of a “Christ figure.”

Critics of McCullers use these terms practically interchangeably, as the parameters and implications they discuss that make up each term are virtually identical in connotations. However, distinction and clarification between the two terms sharpens this discussion. Singer as a God figure implies that the characters see Singer as the ultimate authority and an ultimate object of worship. This is not how the characters see Singer. A Christ figure, however, is the relational figure of the Godhead. Christ exists as God incarnate who came to suffer on earth, and He serves as the mediator between the Christian and God. This is the correct parameter through which to view Singer's representation.

Singer is a Christ figure and not a God figure because he serves as each character's high priest and mediator to reach their self-made god. Scripture describes Christ as the high priest of the order of Melchizedek, translated as "righteous king" (Hebrews 2:17; 4:14). This high priest serves as the one who can enter the holy of holies, into the very presence of God, and he makes sacrifices for the atonement of the sins of the Israelites. The four visitors see Singer as their means to commune with their individual gods. They each see a deep need within them to reach their ideals, but these ideals are beyond their grasp. When Singer steps in, they can go to him and find a way, through conversation, to connect with their gods. In a more contemporary context of a priest, Singer also serves as their confessor. The four visitors go to him to spill their heart and end up telling him of any wrongs they may have done. Singer only sits, smiles, and nods, but from this, they sense a peace in him and a lack of judgment toward their actions. This releases any guilt they feel about the way their passions often lead them to do irrational things.

Part I of *Heart* shows how each of the four visitors find a way to obtain peace by visiting Singer. Right before the visits, the narrator says, "He [Dr. Copeland] remembered the white man's face when he smiled behind the yellow match flame on that rainy night—and peace was in

him” (McCullers *Heart* 90). After this, the novel immediately goes into a chapter focusing on the four characters’ visits. Copeland’s feeling suggests that the characters find peace when they see or think of Singer, and this mindset carries immediately into the next chapter. When Mick visits Singer, she feels that she learns about music because they have an understanding about music together (McCullers *Heart* 91). Mick “would tell him some of her plans that she would not tell anybody else” (McCullers *Heart* 91). Mick quickly comes to feel safe when talking to Singer, feeling understood and able to connect with her music. Dr. Copeland sees Singer as “different from any person of the white race whom [he] had ever known,” and Copeland says, “There was truly none of the quiet insolence about this man” (McCullers *Heart* 91). To him, Singer represents the ideal white man who does not look on any person as lesser. Copeland finds, through Singer, a way to connect to his goal for equality between the white and black communities. Jake finds in Singer an outlet to reach his thoughts about freedom. He begins by shouting passionately as he talks to Singer, but he eventually quiets down, and he always walks away thoughtfully, feeling relaxed and affirmed in his goals (McCullers *Heart* 91). Finally, Biff does that which he wants most: he asks Singer lots of questions, seeking to discover Singer’s nature, and Singer answers him in the best way he can (McCullers *Heart* 91, 205). Each character finds in Singer a chance to connect to their gods through Singer as the mediator. The narrator describes, “They felt that the mute would always understand whatever they wanted to say to him. And maybe even more than that” (McCullers *Heart* 94). Singer does not have to do anything but affirm his visitors by smiling and nodding, and they believe he understands them and feels a connection, too. As the novel continues, this belief prevails and becomes more intricate until it abruptly ends with Singer’s suicide.



To highlight the four visitors' dependence on Singer, the novel shows the hurt and upset they feel when Singer leaves town without warning. The narrator explains, "When his visitors came and saw this empty room they went away with hurt surprise. No one could imagine why he had left like this" (*Heart* 92). They feel abandoned by their priest, but the reason they cannot imagine why he would leave is that they have not taken the time to ask him about himself, and if they did they might understand his need to leave town. Nevertheless, they feel entitled to his company through this sense they have 'discovered' in him. The four people that seek Singer need validation. They have desires that society says are not possible, but these desires make up their identity. So, in essence, society denies their identity. Singer 'listens' to their frustrations about society's close-mindedness and rejections. The characters' dependence on his ability to mediate between themselves and their gods and his ability to 'atone' for their sins by simply nodding his head affirms his position as a Christ figure, more specifically, the priestly, mediator role of the Christ figure.

However, Singer himself deeply needs purpose, and for this reason he clings to his intimacy with Antonapoulos, though Singer is unsure of how much Antonapoulos truly understands (*Heart* 8). Singer is an anomaly. People in the town are uncomfortable unless they can tie some identity to him. The townspeople speculate about his background in an attempt to identify him with some region or ethnicity or class (McCullers *Heart* 200). McCullers writes, "These rumors grew marvelous and very real. Each man described the mute as he wished him to be" (*Heart* 223). They cannot understand him without this link to identity and ignore the opportunity to learn about him by not seeking to know his heart and personality. People see identity as indicative of one's personality and values. Therefore, they feel they must figure out Singer's background. It does not matter to them if their ideas are true; in fact, they do not even

ask him, as they could do because he can read lips and write on his pad of paper. They only wish to satisfy their own need to impose identification.

### **A Disillusioned Friend**

Singer's identity consists of his own emotional immersion into his surrogate god. Antonapoulos is Singer's god. Within Singer, there is a deep need to please Antonapoulos. For example, when the two were still together, Singer had once decided to make a pledge to Antonapoulos, on his own volition, to abstain from cigarettes, beer, and meat for a month (McCullers *Heart* 205). Singer agonized during this month, but he could not disappoint Antonapoulos, even though Antonapoulos did not care what Singer did or did not do. Additionally, throughout the novel, McCullers shows that Antonapoulos cares only for things that satisfy his appetite and that Singer is not a priority to him. When Singer visits Antonapoulos in the hospital and brings him gifts, he does not care about the gifts unless they are food, and when Singer takes Antonapoulos out to a restaurant, he refuses to leave until Singer must resort to coaxing him in public with a bottle of whiskey (McCullers *Heart* 92-94). Although Antonapoulos shows disdain for Singer, Singer desperately desires to please his friend, and he performs this act of worship by constantly taking care of his friend and buying him gifts.

The only time Singer ever feels happy is with Antonapoulos. After Antonapoulos leaves for the hospital, Singer stays depressed until he can be with him. At his first visit, "The old feeling of gaiety and bliss was so quick in him again that he could not control himself" (McCullers *Heart* 93). As Singer leaves, he desperately says everything he can to Antonapoulos before they are separated again (McCullers *Heart* 94). When he writes Antonapoulos, Singer tells 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” (McCullers *Heart* 216). Singer has come to the point where he feels he cannot live without seeing Antonapoulos again. He does everything in his power to come immediately and see him. Of course, the final picture of Singer’s deep emotional need for Antonapoulos is his suicide after Antonapoulos’ death. Without Antonapoulos in his life, Singer feels there is no purpose to living. The deep desire to be with Antonapoulos shows how Singer has placed him in his internal void for a god.

Singer reaches the point where he needs a mediator to Antonapoulos when Antonapoulos is in the hospital. His letters are essentially Singer’s way of praying to his god. He confesses his deep needs and pains, and he tells Antonapoulos how much he adores him (McCullers *Heart* 213-217). Even though he writes letters, he knows Antonapoulos cannot read and never sends them. At this point, when his prayers cannot reach his god, it is clear that he needs a mediator, and McCullers reveals this through a symbolic description. She shows Singer’s spiritual situation when he was with Antonapoulos in contrast with his spiritual situation through their separation. As Singer walks through the town, he comes upon the apartment where the two of them used to live (McCullers *Heart* 206). The narrator describes Singer’s memories:

Singer saw the room just as he had left it—with the large bed for Antonapoulos and the iron cot for himself, the big overstuffed sofa and the camp chair. The broken sugar bowl used for an ash tray, the damp spot on the ceiling where the roof leaked, the laundry box in the corner. On later afternoons like this there would be no light in the kitchen except for the glow from the oil-burners of the big stove. Antonapoulos always turned the wicks so that only a ragged fringe of gold and blue could be seen inside each burner. The room was warm and full of the good smells from the supper. Antonapoulos tasted the dishes with his wooden spoon and they drank glasses of red wine. On the linoleum rug before

the stove the flames from the burners made luminous reflections—five little golden lanterns. As the milky twilight grew darker these little lanterns were more intense, so that when at last the night had come they burned with vivid purity. Supper was always ready by that time and they would turn on the light and draw their chairs to the table. (*Heart* 207)

Within this paragraph, there are makes vivid allusions to the Most Holy Place in tabernacle of the Old Testament as well as the ritual of communion in the New Testament. The tabernacle imagery includes the ashtray that alludes to the table burning incense (Ex. 30:1-10), the oil-lanterns represent the lamp stand (Ex. 25:31-40), and the fringe of gold and blue alludes to the priestly garment (Ex. 28:5). The dinner table represents the table of showbread, as the table of showbread symbolizes the willingness of communion and friendship between God and the high priest (Ex. 25:23-30). The smells in the apartment relate to the smells of the burnt offering in the tabernacle, a sweet aroma to the Lord (Ex. 29:18). The “vivid purity” of the lanterns burning as the night goes on represents the lamps in the tabernacle burning in the Lord’s presence (Ex. 27:21, 30:8). The communion imagery shows in the glasses of red wine Singer and Antonapoulos drink together, which represents the blood of Christ, and the dinner they take together, which represents Christ’s body (Luke 22:7-20). The novel ties together this imagery as they draw the chairs to the table to represent the joining in communion.

The passage shows the intensity with which Singer sees Antonapoulos as his god. When they are together, Singer feels like he is in the holy of holies, taking communion with God himself. After Singer loses fellowship, the “emptiness [is] very deep inside him” as his god has left him (McCullers *Heart* 208). The closest Singer can come to Antonapoulos is when he goes to his workbench to write him a letter, which appears essentially like a prayer. At his bench, “a

cloth curtain separated his place from the rest of the shop so that it was like a small private room” (*Heart* 213). This cloth curtain serves as a reconstruction of the only holy of holies that Singer can be in while separated from Antonapoulos. The imagery of Singer writing his letter of prayer to Antonapoulos contrasts with the previously shown imagery of the temple and communion, showing Singer’s loss of spiritual access to Antonapoulos.

Finally, the novel shows the depth of Singer’s commitment to Antonapoulos as he fully surrenders to be with him at all costs. The narrator says, “He felt such an urge to be with him once more that he would arrange it at any cost – and immediately” (McCullers *Heart* 218). Singer immerses himself in the worship of his friend and willingly sacrifices anything to be with him. Later, the narrator describes that in order to bear the separation, “He surrendered himself wholly to thoughts of his friend” (McCullers *Heart* 322). Singer believes in his heart that their communion is in the deepest spiritual realm. Immediately before he discovers Antonapoulos is dead, he thinks of his friend:

Behind each waking moment there had always been his friend. And this submerged communion with Antonapoulos had grown and changed as though they were together in the flesh. Sometimes he thought of Antonapoulos with awe and self-abasement, sometimes with pride – always with love unchecked by criticism, freed of will. When he dreamed at night the face of his friend was always before him massive and gentle. And in his waking thoughts they were eternally united. (McCullers *Heart* 322).

This level of worship goes beyond human love. Singer feels that, when they are together, they have complete spiritual communion that mere humans cannot truly possess. In the end, Singer believes this so deeply and dedicates himself so fully to Antonapoulos that he feels he has an eternal spiritual connection to his god. He has forgotten all the selfishness that Antonapoulos

showed him in the past, he has forgotten all possibility that Antonapoulos could not read sign language, and he has made Antonapoulos into a heavenly being, incapable of evil thought, forever wise and compassionate. When he reaches this level of idolatry in another human being, he is truly lost and doomed. Singer's suicide reveals the lack of redemption he receives from his complete dedication to his god, and his death exposes the lack of redemption from the other four characters' gods as they each resign to their lack of purpose after Singer's death.

### **Conclusion**

*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* explores the souls of mankind by showing the way in which people creates gods for themselves in order to satisfy an inner void and a need for a spiritual identity. The characters fully fabricate their own god, and these gods inevitably fail them or move irreparably beyond reach. Singer's pyramid dream is real to the characters, as they truly look to Singer in order to reach their gods, and as Singer glorifies Antonapoulos as the highest of all men, but the pyramid crumbles from the top down as each false god suddenly disappears like a vapor.

## Chapter 5:

## The Touch of Gothic

Carson McCullers earns her place in literary history through her experimentation with the Southern Gothic style. Her experience as a native Southerner gave her solid grounds to appeal to her southern audience by presenting the grotesque elements of the South. Critics sometimes speak negatively regarding the Southern Gothic style, mostly criticizing the characters for being frustrating or disgusting. However, Southern Gothic literature can express themes differently than other types of literature, as the genre lends itself to social critique, but distinguishes itself by merging a realism of the South with divulging of spiritually and physically grotesque elements in southern culture. *Heart* communicates to the South that their traditional customs and social standards are skewed and unjust. The novel's insight into the culture gave both an inside and an outside perspective—the former because McCullers grew up in the South and the latter because she went to New York for her education. With both understandings, *Heart's* presentation of the southern culture proves to be personal, though direct.

Understanding the context for McCullers' *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* reveals the theme and interpretation of the novel as a social critique towards discrimination and a celebration of individuality. McCullers' biography shows how her values of individuality and open-mindedness affected the creation of socially isolated characters. Additionally, the cultural context of the South's development after its defeat in the Civil War and the complications of the Reconstruction led to the culture in which McCullers lived. Through the struggles and conflicts of the South, and through the impact of the World Wars, the Southern Renaissance arose as a means to confront mindsets in the South. These conflicts were between the traditional South and the modern desire for progress, and this created the ideal grounds for artistic expression.

McCullers became a unique part of the Southern Renaissance movement through her simultaneous intimate knowledge of the South and her staunch objections to the South's discriminations.

The context of the Southern Gothic style that emerged in the literary culture also set the stage for *Heart*. As the Southern Gothic style developed as a response to southern culture, it manifested into a bold comment on the southern culture that utilized grotesque elements. *Heart* stretched the Southern Gothic style by taking the utilization of grotesque elements and transforming them into an intimate picture of characters labeled grotesque but still truly human. The novel's characters represent real people of the southern culture. May Sarton writes of the characters:

At the end of the book we know them better than our own fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters and we see why they are as they are. The truth about people is always strange, sometimes fantastic, but it is always recognizable. Carson McCullers has given us a group of people in the whole of their humanity and she has given us their relationship to each other, with absolute truth. (20)

Sarton expresses how the characters resonate with a reader's recognition and enlighten the truth about humanity. In this way, the novel not only turns the social critique of the grotesque back onto society, but it also gives voice to the socially isolated by making them the main characters. *Heart's* use of the Southern Gothic style commented on the grotesqueries of traditional culture more than on those who society considered grotesque, as the novel ultimately portrayed relatable characters from those labeled 'freaks'.

One of these characters, Dr. Copeland, provides a portrait of a socially isolated African-American doctor. The mistreatment of him and his family offers a critique on racial



discrimination. Julian Symons writes of McCullers' work, "It is her triumph that from her preoccupation with freaks and with human loneliness she makes fictions which touch and illuminate at many points the world to which all art makes, however obliquely, its final reference: the world of literal reality" (25). *Heart* presents racial discrimination as a realistic reflection the situation in the South. With Willie's abuse in jail and Dr. Copeland's disrespect by both the police and his patients, the novel laments and criticizes racial discrimination by showing the humanity of Copeland and his family. Not only is the harsh reality of discrimination part of Copeland's place in the novel, but he also is socially isolated because of his obsession. This element relates to the former part of Symons' quote as Copeland's community labels him as a freak because of his obsession with the situation of African Americans. The novel's themes of racial discrimination and community isolation both manifest themselves in Copeland and his family, and through them, *Heart* criticizes southern society by conveying the vivid humanity in African Americans and celebrating the worth of African Americans and their culture.

Furthermore, *Heart*'s other main characters also illustrate the theme of isolation. Their frustrations with society's rejection of their differences cause the characters to embrace their own self-made identities. These identities revolve around an obsession that becomes their personal passion. However, the characters' obsessions take a further step and become the characters' gods. Singer then becomes the characters' priestly figure that mediates between them and their gods. However, *Heart* further illustrates the theme of isolation by showing Singer's own isolation during his separation from his dearest friend Antonapoulos. The other characters' obsessions create blinders that keep them from noticing Singer's own problems. The novel's critique aims at the callous, isolated people of society just as much as it aims at traditional southern culture.

*Heart*'s realistic use of contrast sets apart its use of the Southern Gothic style. McCullers describes the style, saying, "The technique briefly is this: a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of a man with a materialistic detail" (*Mortgaged Heart* 252-253). *Heart* creates a realistic portrait by highlighting incongruities and inconsistencies in society. One inconsistency present would be the revulsion that her isolated characters feel towards the southern culture. Their revulsion stems from their distaste for the rejection they face from southern culture, so their own rejection of this same culture is inconsistent. McCullers further writes:

Morally the attitude is this: human beings are neither good nor evil, they are only unhappy and more or less adjusted to their unhappiness. People are born into a world of confusion, a society in which the system of values is so uncertain that who can say if a man is worth more than a load of hay, or if life itself is precious enough to justify the struggle to obtain the material objects necessary for its maintenance. (*Mortgaged Heart* 255).

This struggle to find consistency and purpose in society influences the novel to present isolated characters that also ignore the people around them, focusing instead on self-constructed passions, or characters whose outward appearance fully contradicts inward values. One example of this is John Singer. The townspeople and the novel's four other main characters all attribute relatable characteristics to him that he does not possess, as he thinks only of being with Antonapoulos again. *Heart*'s illustration of society's too often inward focus expresses the critique meant to encourage Southerners to find common ground, and in doing so, the novel highlights the necessity to view every person as inherently valuable and fully human.

### Considerations for Future Research

A continuation of the research presented in this project would conduct a thorough examination of the specific elements of Southern Gothic in *Heart* as compared or contrasted to specific elements in other Southern Gothic works. This project alone is insufficient fully to develop the deeper relationships between McCullers and other Southern Gothic writers, so it presents only the defining elements of the style and *Heart's* interpretation of those elements. Further research could also evaluate the consequences of McCullers' novel in both the North as observers of the South and the southern culture itself. This research develops the novel's significance but does not fully analyze the effects of its social criticism on either noted region. Both of these suggestions would address the questions raised by this research, but are too broad to deal with sufficiently in this research.

*Heart's* characters are members of the southern culture. These people occupied the streets of the South—Southerners recognized them. However, Southerners had not explored the lives of these people, and because the novel was able to present their perspective, Southerners could begin to understand that these outcasts on the margins of society were more like them than they had ever realized or cared to admit. These grotesque characters related to them, and that is why they are pitiable. *Heart's* characterization and the use of Southern Gothic elements gave the novel an open avenue for social critique.

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