

**GAZING INTO THE SILENT MIRROR: A SEARCH FOR EXPRESSION AND
CONNECTION IN CARSON McCULLERS' THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER**

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INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this essay is to explore the construction, transformation and relationships of the five main characters in Carson McCullers' first novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* published in 1940. Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Benedict Mady Copeland, and Jake Blount, residents in a southern town of the United States meet John Singer, a deaf mute silver engraver who becomes their object of love and the axis around which their lives revolve until he commits suicide.

The relationship that develops between the characters and Singer allows them to explore their feelings, thoughts, and plans; the fact that he welcomes them unconditionally and never criticizes them or contradicts them encourages them to carry out some of the plans they have been putting off due to their loneliness and difficulty to communicate with others. Through their conversations with Singer, the other four characters reaffirm their identities and embrace themselves as ever-changing, incomplete characters. The five characters are grotesques that can be seen from many different angles.

In 1959 Carson McCullers summarized her concerns as a writer: "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. 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." Indeed few authors have written with more eloquence and compassion of human isolation and loneliness than McCullers, whose strangely haunting characters and stories embody that mysterious blend of psychological, physical and cultural otherness that has been called "the Southern grotesque." McCullers's

most memorable characters—whether amazon, dwarf, deaf-mute, transvestite, ungainly adolescent, dignified African American housekeeper, lonely and anxious white child—share Frankie Addams’s yearning for “the we of me” in *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). Their desire for love and acceptance is indelibly marked by an ultimate and tragically resounding failure to forge meaningful human connections. Love, as McCullers wrote in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1941), is simply “a new, strange loneliness.”

The characters in Carson McCullers’ first novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* experience similar conflicts. These conflicts are marked by a deep loneliness that sinks the characters in desperation. The five characters in this novel have two realities, one internal and another external: in their internal reality the characters dream of what they would like to transform in their lives or in society at a large scale, they dream of the places where they would like to be, of what they would like to be in the future; they make plans and they feel happy and satisfied with them. In their external reality they face the terrifying impossibility of communicating their plans, dreams and ideas to the people around them. They face the mockery, fear and anger their different lifestyles and mindsets generate.

Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, Benedict Mady Copeland, Biff Brannon and John Singer all have a sensitivity for the artistic, the humanities, which differs from the rooted indifference of the people in the southern mill town they inhabit. They seem to always be on the verge of tears or about to burst out in anger. The impossibility of achieving communication with others, of making a real connection, frustrates them and makes them seem grotesque. Their characteristic traits are built through symbols, the particular use of the language each character has, their relationship with themselves and with John Singer, who is the only person the other four feel they can communicate with, and avoid judgment or ridicule. It is through this imaginary relationship— in which Singer is a vessel where the characters deposit their

most precious thoughts and longings— that they reach a catharsis. However, they also realize that they are doomed to frustration.

This essay sets out to explore how the five main characters of the novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* relate among them and to John Singer who works as a Christ figure and a mirror in which they all see the best of themselves and justify their thoughts and actions and reaffirm their identity. The other four characters make singer their beloved, just like Singer has made his friend Antonapoulos his own.

1. BIOGRAPHY OF CARSON MCCULLERS

Carson McCullers was born Lula Carson Smith in Columbus, Georgia on February 19th 1917 and she died in New York in 1967. She was the oldest of three children. Her father, Lamar Smith was a jeweler and a watch repairman, and her mother Marguerite Waters Smith had worked for the jeweler who employed Lamar before he had his own store.

She left an impressive literary legacy: four novels, a novella, two plays, twenty short stories, some two dozen nonfiction pieces, a book of children's verse, and a handful of poems. The first novel she published was *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and it is said to be her most autobiographical tale. The second one was *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) to which readers responded both praising and condemning it for the morbid behavior of her characters. In 1943 she published her novella *The Ballad of the Sad Café* which is considered her finest work along with *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). Then in 1950 she published the theatrical adaptation of *The Member of the Wedding* which won most of the theater awards that year and ran for 501 performances on Broadway. Her second play *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1957) closed in seven weeks because reviews declared it a disaster when it opened. Her final novel *Clock without Hands* (1961) got the sixth place on *The New York Times* best seller list. And three years later, she published *Sweet as a Pickle and Clean as a Pig* (1964), which was a collection of children's verse.

At the age of twenty-three, having recently published *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Carson met two of Thomas Mann's children, Erika and Klaus. They were traveling around the United States with their Austrian friend Annemarie Clarac-Swarzenbach who quickly became Carson's beloved. Klaus Mann wrote on his diary a very interesting comment of Carson's first novel and Carson herself:

“July 5, 1940—Reading among other things *The heart is a Lonely Hunter*—the melancholy novel by that strange girl, Carson McCullers who came to see us the other day. Very interesting, in parts. An abysmal sadness, but remarkably devoid of sentimentality. Rather grim and concise. What astounding insight into the ultimate inconsolability and incurability of the human soul! Her style and vision remind me some of Julian Green. Wonder if she may know him...I hope she’ll write that story about the Negro and the refugee, to which she referred to as one of her next projects. Uncannily versed in the secrets of all freaks and pariahs, she should be able to compose a revealing tale of exile” (Carr, 1976, p. 100).

The Southern writer, McCullers felt, was bound to a peculiar regionalism of language and voices and foliage and memory, which was as profoundly important to writing as was personality. Her roots were in Columbus, Georgia, on the Chatahoochee River. Sister, as she was called in the family, was an intensely shy, eccentric, gawky girl seen by her mother, Marguerite Waters Smith, herself a raconteur of local note, as a prodigy. Young Carson, as she came to call herself at age thirteen, began writing in her early teens, though she was intent on becoming a concert pianist. She set off for New York City with \$500 from the sale of a family heirloom ring, intending to study music at Julliard School of Music. However, after losing all of her money on a subway and being forced to work odd jobs, she enrolled in creative writing classes at Columbia University. Her first story, *Wunderkind*, published in 1936 in *Story* by her professor Whit Burnett, who edited the magazine, launched her career at nineteen.

The 1940’s would prove McCullers’s most productive decade. After marrying fellow southerner and would-be writer Reeves McCullers in 1937, she published, in quick succession, *Heart and Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941). At only twenty-three, reveling in critical acclaim, she received the first of a series of grants to support her writing. She and Reeves gladly left the south for New York, where, the marriage already foundering, Carson

fell in love with the Swiss writer Annemarie Clarac-Schwarzenbach, to whom *Reflections* is dedicated. The following years brought a divorce and then an eight-year second marriage to Reeves, which ended with his suicide in 1953. Over the years their relationship was fraught with separations and reconciliations, professional jealousy on his part and excessive demands for attention on hers. Both husband and wife drank immoderately; both threatened and attempted suicide and both participated in a stream of heterosexual and homosexual affairs.

When *The Member of the Wedding* had secured her place as a major literary figure, McCullers spent the summer of 1946 on Nantucket Island with Tennessee Williams following his suggestion that she adapt the novel for the stage. Opening January 1950 in New York to glowing reviews and a run of 501 performances, the play is considered one of the outstanding adaptations of a novel to the American stage. It garnered many prestigious awards, a film version with most of the original cast, and financial success for its author. *Reflections* was reissued that same year with a glowing preface by Williams; and in 1951 the omnibus volume *The Ballad of the Sad Café and Other Works* earned McCullers her first academic critical responses, which continued to confirm the importance of her early achievement. However, a second play, *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1957), quickly folded, and her fifth and final novel *Clock* was cited as evidence of the diminishment of its author's imaginative powers. Meanwhile, McCullers's health, always poor since an early bout with rheumatic fever and a series of strokes beginning in her twenties, had greatly deteriorated. Besieged by impaired limbs, broken bones from falls, breast cancer, and continuing strokes, she was almost always in severe pain. After lying comatose for forty-seven days from a massive brain hemorrhage, she died on September 29, 1967, at age fifty.

2. ANTECEDENTS

Southern literature following the Second World War grew thematically as it embraced the social and cultural changes in the South resulting from the American Civil Rights Movement. In addition, more female and African-American writers began to be accepted as part of Southern literature, including African Americans such as Zora Neale Hurston and Sterling Allen Brown, along with women such as Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, Ellen Glasgow, Carson McCullers, Katherine Anne Porter, and Shirley Ann Grau, among many others. Other well-known Southern writers of this period include Reynolds Price, James Dickey, William Price Fox, Davis Grubb, Walker Percy, and William Styron. One of the most highly praised Southern novels of the 20th century, *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, won the Pulitzer Prize when it was published in 1960. New Orleans native and Harper Lee's friend, Truman Capote also found great success in the middle 20th century with *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and later *In Cold Blood*. Another famous novel of the 1960s is *A Confederacy of Dunces*, written by New Orleans native John Kennedy Toole in the 1960s but not published until 1980. It won the Pulitzer Prize in 1981 and has since become a cult classic.

Carson McCullers actually met and shared some artist residences with Katherine Anne Porter (who did not like her) and Flannery O'Connor and other writers and artists like poet W. H. Auden, Gypsy Rose Lee, Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, Salvador Dali, Virgil Thomson, Aaron Copland, Leonard Bernstein, Kurt Weill, Paul and Jane Bowles, Richard Wright, and Oliver Smith. She was also friends with playwright Tennessee Williams who suggested that she adapt her novel *The Member of the Wedding* to a play that received great reviews.

Her work is said to have been influenced by Mark Twain, Henry James, and William Faulkner who were influenced by Gustave Flaubert and the Russian realists. "McCullers herself nominates the Russian realists (Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Gogol, Chekhov, Aksakov, and

Tugenev) and Flaubert as the literary antecedents of the southern grotesque and implicitly acknowledges their influence on her own work; she also regards Faulkner's *Sound and the Fury* and *As I Lay Dying* as the major contemporary examples of this southern grotesque genre" (White, 2003, pp. 122-123).

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NEW CRITICISM

American criticism was dominated by the branch of formalism that dominated from 40's to 60's in The United States. In an attempt to demonstrate the existence of formal unity, critics focus on every part of a work –words, images, elements- thus showing how each contributes to a central unifying theme. Since every detail of the work is linked to a theme or idea, those are generally treated as *symbolic*, as figurative or allegorical, representations of that central, unifying idea.

When every part of the unit is related to the whole and the whole is reflected in each part, is called organic unity. The external, preconceived structure of rules that do not arise from the individuality of the work but from the type of genre is called mechanical unity. New critical analysis, 'or explication of the text', is especially effective in the critical reading of poetry.

The New Critics' focus on the theme or meaning as well as form means that for them the literature is referential: it points to something outside itself, things in the real, external world or in human experience—a tree, a sound wave, love. The New Critics, in general, do not question the reality of the phenomenal world or the ability of language to represent it.

This approach will be used to analyze Mrs. McCullers' first novel because the focus of the essay are the internal elements of the novel; how the characters are developed and relate to their environment and to the people who surround them, as well as the symbols that lead to interpretations of the characters.

4. GAZING INTO THE SILENT MIRROR: A SEARCH FOR EXPRESSION AND CONNECTION IN MCCULLERS' *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER*

In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Carson McCullers explores a brief period in the lives of five characters: the year when Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Dr. Copeland, and Jake Blount meet John Singer who becomes their object of love. All the characters are looking for something that helps them reaffirm their identity; something that offers them the possibility to express the subjectivity they have built. John Singer seems to be the most adequate beloved since, due to his physical impairment, he is a passive receiver of the other characters' most passionate feelings and thoughts. Because he is a deaf mute, he reads their lips and nods and smiles at what they say to him, and the others think he is a wise man who understands absolutely everything they feel and think. Through their relationship with Singer the other four characters stop feeling like outsiders and grotesques of the southern town where they live. Singer becomes a positive influence for them and a reflection of the best qualities they possess. At least for a while, the terrifying loneliness and inability to communicate with others does not seem so horrible after all, since there is one person who listens to them and who agrees with whom they are and who they want to become.

Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, Dr. Copeland and Biff Brannon have no idea who John Singer is. They know he works in a jewelry store as a silver engraver and that he has his meals at the New York Café where Biff Brannon, the owner, can stare at him and wonder about him. And even though they feel curious about him, all they do is speculate. Dr. Copeland, the African American medical doctor sees him as a member of another oppressed race, the Jews, and Jake Blount thinks Singer understands his scholarly speeches about Marxism. Mick Kelly, ironically enough, thinks Singer is as interested in music as she is, and Biff Brannon simply wonders why the others have decided to make a gift of everything in

them to this man, and he feels drawn to him because of how mysterious he is and because, as his wife says, he likes freaks.

John Singer himself has an object of love that no one knows about. He worships his deaf mute friend Antonapoulos, with whom he has shared an apartment for ten years. Antonapoulos works in his cousin's grocery store making candy. He enjoys simple pleasures like eating and drinking gin, and he is overweight. McCullers herself describes Singer's beloved as someone whose "mental, sexual and spiritual development is that of a child of about seven years old" (McCullers, 1999, p. 174). The two friends have an established routine that makes Singer very happy. Singer loves telling his friend everything that goes through his mind; when they are together, Singer's hands move like hummingbirds, and although sometimes he wonders about his friend's intelligence, he normally thinks Antonapoulos understands absolutely everything he says to him. All this calm and happiness come to an abrupt end when Antonapoulos starts acting strange, breaking the law, and his cousin sends him to an asylum where he becomes ill. Although Singer tries to convince the cousin to let him stay in town, promising he will take care of him, the cousin ignores him. Singer is suddenly forced to face the world by himself and he feels unable to do it. The only person who knows him and understands him is no longer available and he sticks his hands in his pockets, like a vow of silence, until he can see him again. Like this he walks slowly down the poor streets of town, feeling miserable and longing to have his friend and his life back. He decides to move to a boarding house owned by the Kelly family and he starts having his meals at the New York Café and that is how he comes in contact, first with Mick Kelly and later on with Biff Brannon. Although Singer is the first character to be introduced in the novel and around which the other characters pivot, he is the flattest character. McCullers herself describes him as being "isolated from the ordinary human emotions of other people to a psychopathic degree. He is very observant and intuitive. On the surface he is a model of

kindness and cooperativeness—but nothing that goes on around him disturbs his inner self” (McCullers, 1999, p. 165).

Virginia Spencer Carr writes: “Mick, Jake and Copeland see in the thin soberly dressed mute a certain ‘mystic superiority’ and ascribe to him in a kind of mirror counterpoint the qualities they would like for him to have. He becomes, in effect, a repository of their own illusions and stored-up anguish” (Carr, 1990, p. 21).

Singer’s visitors see themselves in him; when they talk to him they reveal secret and intense feelings and thoughts that are the basis of their characters. They have the chance to reflect on these feelings even if Singer does not advise them or contradict them. Most importantly, they can communicate them avoiding mockery, fear, or rejection, which is what they face with other people. Singer brings out the best in all the characters because he offers nothing but generosity. His physical impairment is a symbol of his incapability to love anyone different from the object of his love. And the characters are willing to give him everything even though he does not want it because he seems willing to take it. Finding Singer gives them the possibility to reaffirm their personalities, to realize that they are not freaks, to carry out their plans.

Spencer Carr talks about the relationship the characters have among themselves and with Singer:

“Their paths criss-cross throughout the town—and each goes off his separate way for a time—but all are drawn repeatedly back to Singer, from whom they derive their spiritual and emotional enrichment, just as they are drawn to the all-night diner for their physical nourishment. Ultimately, their spiritual and material needs—and the nurturing that ensues temporarily—become so enmeshed that the characters have little identity apart from each other” (Carr, 1990, p. 20).

Mick Kelly is a twelve-year-old girl who is having a hard time going from childhood to womanhood. She has two sisters and three brothers and since her mother is too busy keeping their boarding house afloat, she plays surrogate mother for her two younger brothers. She has grown too much over the last few months and can no longer play with the little children and she is bored by what her older sisters do, like wearing makeup or worrying about being actresses in Hollywood. She dresses in boy's clothes and thinks life would be a lot better if she were one, in fact, when her sisters criticize her outfit she responds confirming her preference: "I wear shorts because I don't want to wear your old hand-me-downs. I don't want to be like either of you and I don't want to look like either of you. And I won't. That's why I wear shorts. I'd rather be a boy any day and I wish I could move in with Bill" (McCullers, 1940, p. 35). She used to be her brother Bill's favorite but he has his own business to mind and he finds her too childish these days. Like when she becomes upset because the violin she has been trying to build out of a broken ukulele and some strings does not come out well and Bill tells her that he could have told her it was not going to work from the very beginning. She resents the fact that Bill has his own room and could leave the house and have adventures in the world whenever he feels like it, whereas she is trapped in her role of surrogate mother and in that small, miserable town. She would like to be an inventor like Edison or a composer like Mozart, or even a dictator like Mussolini, so that everyone would know her name. She smokes cigarettes to stunt her growth and she likes to spend a lot of time on her own to be able to go into her inner room. In there, she thinks of her plans to take piano lessons and compose symphonies, to travel around the world and get to see snow, and when she meets Mr. Singer he becomes a part of her inner room as well. Mick spends her summer pushing her two little brothers around in a wagon and standing outside neighborhood houses where they have radios, listening to whatever she can catch from the programs.

Mick starts going to Singer's room where she is always welcomed with a smile and where she is invited to sit and talk about whatever is on her mind. Unlike the rest of her house where there is noise everywhere, Singer's room is quiet and peaceful and she has the chance to escape her two little brothers for a while. She tells Mr. Singer that she will become famous one day and that there is this intense feeling she gets when she listens to Mozart's music that brings tears to her eyes. Singer is not very interested in music since he cannot hear, but after a while he buys a radio and lets her listen to it regularly. He likes to have company because that helps him cope with his aching longing for his friend, Antonapoulos. Mick sees in Singer a reflection of herself that invites possibilities. Because Singer never replies or expresses what he thinks, she believes her plans are feasible and she feels confident. He becomes an extension of her inner room on the outside.

All Singer can think of is when he will go and see his friend to tell him all that has been going on since he left. And when he goes to see him he realizes that not only is Antonapoulos living at a great physical distance from him, but that his mind is constantly wandering. Still, Singer's hands move at full speed and he feels relieved that all the thoughts he has accumulated throughout the months are being expressed. He gives his friend characteristics like wisdom and understanding even though it is evident that Antonapoulos does not pay any attention to or understand what Singer is trying to tell him. Antonapoulos is incapable of returning his friend's love but to Singer this is not a problem as long as he can express himself freely.

Gleeson-White associates Singer's signing uncontrollably when he thinks of Antonapoulos as a symbol of a forbidden homoerotic desire. She compares the tale "Hands" in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* with Singer's situation. In Anderson's tale Wing Biddlebaum is known for his expressive hands that are forever active. Then one day, one of his students dreams unspeakable things of his teacher and goes on to tell them as facts. After that, all the

kids' fathers tell Biddlebaum to "keep your hands to yourself". After that he goes around town trying to conceal them. Similarly Singer is always trying to conceal his hands.

"Alone once Antonapoulos is admitted to the asylum, Singer walks with his 'hands stuffed tight in the pockets of his trousers' (15). He has no use for them: he has nothing to say, no one to say it to. Yet, his hands take on a life of their own: 'sometimes when he was alone and his thoughts were with Antonapoulos his hands would begin to shape the words before he knew it. Then when he realized he was like a man caught talking aloud to himself [...] the shame and the sorrow mixed together and he doubled his hands and put them behind him. But they would not let him rest.' (182) The activity of Singer's hands causes him shame, just as Antonapoulos's hands in a dream cause him to wake in fear. As Budick comments: 'Singer might well feel afraid of what he has witnessed in his dream of raw and naked desire. He may have very good reasons to refuse to say what things he has seen' (148). Any form of autoeroticism must menace the aim of 'natural love': the survival of the species through procreation" (White, 2003, p. 54).

When Singer eats at the New York Café, Biff Brannon observes and is puzzled by him. Singer serves Brannon as an object of reflection about the human heart and its mysteries. He does not share much with him or go to his room as often as the other characters but Singer is as much an influence for him as for the others. Brannon is a big, quiet man, who likes to observe everything that goes on around him. Lawrence Graver contends that Biff Brannon is supposed to be the character whose point of view is the author's *raisonneur*:

"As a café owner, he can see more of the drama than anyone else and he is sympathetic to a wide range of emotional grotesques; a male with a strong feminine strain, he is able to temper the chill of analysis with the warmth of an intuitive compassion. Following the presentation of Singer, Biff is the first of the main characters to be introduced, and his reflections form the coda that brings the novel to an end" (Graver, 1986, p. 55).

Biff lives with his wife Alice in the New York Café but their relationship has long ceased to be a loving one. They represent opposites for each other. Alice is deeply religious but she feels disdain for other human beings, whereas Biff is skeptical but full of motherly feelings for those around him. Especially for those who are physically impaired. His wife, Alice, says he likes freaks, given that he is one himself. The more deformed people are, the more generous he is: “Whenever somebody with a harelip or T.B came into the place he would set him up to beer. Or if the customer were a hunchback or a bad cripple, then it would be whiskey on the house. There was one fellow who had had his peter and his left leg blown off in a boiler explosion, and whenever he came to town there was a free pint waiting for him” (McCullers, 1940, pp. 17-18). In fact, there is something peculiar about him: He wishes he were Mick Kelly’s mother; he imagines making little crêpe de chine dresses for the children he would like to adopt after his wife has died. He feels afraid of the tenderness he feels for he knows that his longing is “queer”. When he thinks about the parts of the body that some people protect and try to keep secret, like Blount’s lips or Mick’s developing nipples, or Singer’s hands, the hand in his trousers pocket slides to his genitals, but he dismisses the thought. He has not shared the bed with his wife in a long time since she works during the day and he works at night. But more than that, in one of his moments of reflection, he remembers the time when he could not lie with a woman anymore. This impotence has been interpreted by Sarah Gleeson-White as a displaced homosexuality in, “Androgyny: Two Bodies in One”. Gleeson-White examines androgyny both in Miss Amelia from *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and in Biff Brannon. Curiously, Amelia’s androgyny has been deemed freakish and strange, whereas Biff Brannon’s androgyny has been seen as the representation of ideal classic androgyny which evokes the image of a pregnant man, a man with breasts, a man who has access to the powerful status of omniscience as being both father and mother: “He is the pregnant man, while she is the phallic woman. However, there is an obvious dissymmetry

between the man and the woman who seek androgyny. Psychoanalytic theory, for example, does not consider (the fantasy of) the androgynous pregnant man a menacing figure. At worst, he represents ‘a descent into feminine castration and abjection.’ On the other hand, the fantasy of the phallic woman, in her ‘monstrous ascent into phallicism,’ is a powerful and unsettling figure” (White, 2003, p. 102).

Gleeson-white also talks about Brannon’s transvestism. She studies the suspension and foregrounding of gender identities in the works of Carson McCullers through the cross-dressing and transvestism of characters like Mick Kelly, Frankie Addams, Amelia Evans and Biff Brannon. Whereas the female characters perform a sustained and public transvestism, Biff cross-dresses privately. He uses his wife’s lemon rinse and her aqua florida and in a sense he feels that he might make a better woman than Alice ever could. Brannon’s cross-dressing is seen as a reflection on the self: “... just as pertinently, Biff, McCullers’ principal male cross-dresser, performs femininity in private. As such, his transgression is not susceptible to the societal pressure or punishment to which the females are exposed. Biff Brannon’s cross-dressing, safely done in the bedroom before the mirror, becomes a private meditation on the self and its metamorphic possibilities and lacks the social commentary and prospective upheaval the women’s transvestism provokes” (White, 2003, p. 77).

Brannon spends most of his time reflecting on the subject of Singer and the characters who have started going up to his room to talk. He first wonders about Blount because it puzzles him that he wants to tell everything to the mute: “The poor son-of-a-bitch talking and talking and not ever getting anybody to understand what he meant. Not knowing himself, most likely. And the way he gravitated around the deaf-mute and picked him out and tried to make him a present of everything in him” (McCullers, 1940, p. 27). He wonders why the other main characters have decided to make of Singer a home-made god, but it is a question

that he is unable to answer and according to Virginia Spencer Carr (1990), he is the one who can be seen as a Christ figure instead of Singer at the end of the novel.

Brannon's circumstance is complicated for he offers Mick and Jake Blount the possibility to talk about what they are feeling by asking them questions but they reject his interest and think he is nosy for offering such possibilities. He is perfectly capable of receiving and returning someone's love and longs for it, unlike Singer who appears to be available because he cannot cope with his loneliness, but would much rather be with Antonapoulos.

Jake Blount meets Singer because when Blount arrives in town he goes to drink at the New York Café. Blount is always drunk and has a violent manner that drives other people away. Besides, his appearance is strange. His head seems too big for his body and he has a child-like face covered by a big mustache that serves as protection when he gets upset or too emotional and his lips start trembling. He catches a glimpse of Singer as he is having dinner and he notices that, unlike the other people in the New York Café, Singer is not staring or laughing at him. He centers his attention on Singer and starts directing his speech at him, making the other people laugh even harder because he is not yet aware of the fact that Singer cannot hear. Later on, after Blount has gotten into a fight and cannot remain standing, Singer offers to take him in for the night and Blount feels that he has finally found someone who is not indifferent, someone who is generous and helpful and who will surely understand Blount's quest.

In her outline, McCullers describes Blount's attitude towards man as one that "...vacillates continually between hate and the most unselfish love. His attitude toward the principles of communism is much the same as his attitude toward man. Deep inside him he is an earnest communist, but he feels that in concrete application all communistic societies up until the present have degenerated into bureaucracies. He is unwilling to compromise and his

is the attitude of all or nothing. His inner and outward motives are so contradictory at times that it is hardly an exaggeration to speak of the man as being deranged. The burden which he has taken on himself is too much for him” (McCullers, 1999, p. 169).

Singer offers to let Blount stay in his room until he finds a place of his own and when Blount has found it, he keeps coming to Singer’s room where he is welcomed with cold beers or gin, and where he can go on his tirades about Marxism and the ideas he has to free the proletariat from the oppression of capitalism. Since all Singer does is nod, Blount feels that his ideas are not crazy, that he could probably send his message and have people listen and *know*, like he and Singer know. It is through his relationship with Singer that Blount decides to somehow settle and find a job at the Sunny Dixie Show as a ride operator. When he starts working, he starts trying to deliver his message to some of his co-workers, telling them about strikes and how low their wages are and how they must stand up and fight, but all they do is laugh at him. He feels angry and would like to fight with them, but he knows he can always go to Singer’s room and relieve his tensions with his equal.

Once in Singer’s room, Blount starts describing himself to Singer:

“You see, it’s like I am two people. One of me is an educated man. I been in some of the biggest libraries in the country. I read. I read all the time. I read books that tell the pure honest truth. Over there in my suitcase I have books by Karl Marx and Thorstein Veblen and such writers as them. I read them over and over, and the more I study the madder I get. I know every word printed on every page. To begin with I like words. Dialectic materialism—jesuitical prevarication’—theological propensity” (McCullers, 1940, p. 59). He explains all this to the mute, thinking that he really knows what he means and then suddenly Singer writes on a piece of paper asking him if he is a Democrat or a Republican, which proves that he has no idea what Blount is talking about. But all Jake does is crumble the piece of paper and keep talking. Blount actually finds pleasure in listening to himself speak; he likes his tone and the

way he pronounces the syllables, so that in the end, as long as he is not mocked or criticized, the illusion of being listened to and understood is what keeps him attached to Singer.

In his long monologues, Blount tells Singer about how he came to know. At first, he tells him, he was led to believe in God, and he had faith and on his free time he prayed. Then one day he took a hammer and hammered a nail through his hand. He wanted to preach around the world; to be an evangelist. Then, Miss Clara, a lady he met in Texas, started telling him about the truth and lending him books and little by little he started understanding the lie that the “don’t-knows” live with even though it is so plain. He speaks of the time when he created an organization whose motto was “action.” He planned to tell many people the truth until they understood and that way he would not have to be mad all the time because more and more people would know and they would start riots and things would change. But the people who started the organization with him stole the little money they had to buy food and gin and he was mad all over again. He tells Singer that he and Jesus and Karl Marx could sit at a table and talk as only those who know can do it. Then one morning, after spending the night in Singer’s room, he walks to his neighborhood and finds a message written on a wall: “ye shall eat the flesh of the mighty, and drink the blood of the princes of the earth.” He writes right under the message that whoever wrote it should meet him there next day at noon. A month later he meets the author of the messages who turns out to be nothing but a crazy preacher who does not hold much significance to him. All Simms does is try to convert him with threats. He is bored by him. If it were not for Singer, he would leave the town which, in comparison to any other towns he has visited, is the loneliest.

Meanwhile, Singer writes letters to Antonapoulos telling him about his visitors and how they love to talk. He knows that Antonapoulos cannot read but this is not a problem; writing helps him cope with his loneliness. During the winter, Singer feels that the image of Antonapoulos has grown larger in him. He thinks of him as a wise and understanding man. He

wishes to tell him what he feels at the moment because although everyone thinks he understands everything, he feels he has been left in an “alien land. Alone. He had opened his eyes and around him there was much he did not understand. He was bewildered” (McCullers, 1940, p. 173). Seven months after the other characters start going to his room, he is used to their lips and he knows what they will say even before they start, because they always talk about the same thing, except Brannon who likes to ask questions. And even though being with any person is better than the emptiness he feels, he cannot talk to anyone and his hands become a torment to him. He finds himself shaping words without even realizing it and he feels shame and sorrow. He visits the house he used to share with his friend and feels the emptiness spread inside him.

When Antonapoulos’ birthday comes, Singer disappears without telling his visitors, puzzling them. He goes to the asylum, taking Antonapoulos a movie projector with many cartoon movies but the evening ends badly because Antonapoulos becomes upset during the dinner outing Singer planned. He returns to the town sadder and more hopeless than before and when his visitors ask him where he has been, he replies with a puzzled smile as if he does not understand what they are asking him.

Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland is a black medical doctor whose ideals are to bring his people the knowledge they require to fight oppression, discrimination, and the unending acts of violence blacks have been subjected to by whites for centuries. Renouncing the idea of God and accepting responsibility for their actions; acknowledging their situation as critical and working to change it, are among Copeland’s demands to his family and community. Demands they respond to with fear or mockery since they are afraid to let go of their heaviest chain of oppression, Christianity: that resignation that keeps them hopeful and jovial as much as inactive in changing their condition. Copeland’s own daughter, Portia, regards his rational, urgent claims for freedom and justice as some kind of mad nonsense only a man who has lost

God can espouse. His name: Benedict Mady seems to be a symbol of how other people see him, a man who does good deeds but whose speech is full of madness. Adding to his speech is the exploding violence that comes to him at moments when he can no longer suppress his frustration and anger at being regarded as insignificant by whites and as unsuitable by blacks. He seems to linger in thresholds of different things; he loves his family and the struggle of his community but he despises their ignorance and their resignation. His speech can go from quoting Spinoza to using the strongest of curse words. His children both fear and mock him. Having been named after the great thinkers their father admires, such as Karl Marx and William Shakespeare, Dr. Copeland expects them to have a promising future. He wants Hamilton to be a great scientist, Karl Marx a teacher of the Negro race, William a lawyer to fight against injustice and Portia a doctor of women and children. From an early age, he starts reading to them and explaining their worth as human beings. It is ironic that he is both his family's savior and tyrant. He really wants what is best for them, knowing that education is their only way out; he believes in the "strong true purpose" the books he has read seem to convey.

From the time they were young:

"He would tell them of the yoke they must thrust from their shoulders—the yoke of submission and slothfulness. And when they were a little older he would impress upon them that there was no God, but that their lives were holy and for each one of them there was this real true purpose. He would tell it to them over and over, and they would sit together far away from him and look with their big Negro-children eyes at their mother. And Daisy would sit without listening, gentle and stubborn" (McCullers, 1940, p. 69).

He would like the Negro people of his town to know about contraception, to take good care of themselves so that they would not have to go on suffering the poverty and violence that has haunted them for centuries. When he asks his daughter if she means to plan for

children with her husband, she becomes angry and says that there are things that depend entirely on God. In the tense moment that follows he starts thinking about all the children he delivers and the more than a dozen named after him. His frustration is clear in this passage: “But all of his life he had told and explained and exhorted. You cannot do this, he would say. There are all reasons why this sixth or fifth or ninth child cannot be, he would tell them. It is not more children we need but more chances for the ones already on the earth. Eugenic Parenthood for the Negro Race was what he would exhort them to. 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, 1940, p. 63).

He meets John Singer one night while he is trying to light a cigarette and Singer comes and lights it for him. He is surprised and a little scared that a white man has offered to help a Negro. He looks into Singer’s eyes and finds a relief from the hatred he feels towards white men. Finally there is someone who will not humiliate or mock him and he has the appearance of people from another oppressed race, the Jews. Copeland feels that this white stranger will surely understand what it is like to be rejected.

Through his daughter Portia, who works for the Kellys, Dr. Copeland gets acquainted with Singer and he starts going to his room and taking Singer on his visits to his patients around town. He tells Singer about his ideas to liberate his people from the violence and neglect of white people. When he is around Singer, the old black violent feeling of impotence and hatred subsides and he feels at ease. He starts feeling a renewed energy towards his cause, his true purpose, even though he sees the same humiliation and violence against himself and his family.

When he talks to his daughter about Singer, he describes his deep resentment for whites: “The quiet insolence of the white race was one thing he had tried to keep out of his mind for years. When the resentment would come to him he would cogitate and study. In the

streets and around white people he would keep the dignity on his face and always be silent. When he was younger it was ‘Boy’—but now it was ‘Uncle...’ And he would not listen, but would walk on with the dignity in him and be silent” (McCullers, 1940, p. 72).

It is that silence that consumes him and brings about in him that black violent feeling that he is not capable of fighting with study or meditation; the feeling that drove his wife and children away; the feeling that makes him think that Jake Blount is trying to make fun of him when he takes the black man into the New York Café when all Blount wants is to talk to him because he sees Copeland as an equal even though neither of them would admit it. This feeling never leaves him and drives him to his lonely death.

When he has spent some time in the company of Singer, Doctor Copeland feels that he understands him, that in him there is something of a race that has been subjected to oppression, which is why he thinks of him as a Jew. He invites Singer to visit his patients and talks to him about everything that goes on in his mind: “With him he spoke of chemistry and the enigma of the universe. Of the infinitesimal sperm and the cleavage of the ripened egg. Of the complex million-fold division of the cells. Of the mystery of living matter and the simplicity of death. And also he spoke with him of race” (McCullers, 1940, p. 119). By this time, he has become sick with tuberculosis but he cannot find time to rest. The strong true purpose keeps him going even though he has started to cough blood into his handkerchief. But he finds some peace in being able to communicate with Singer. Even the fact that his son Willie has been sent to jail does not seem so bleak now that he can talk to someone who listens to him.

Singer starts taking longer walks around town observing the poverty and loneliness and exhaustion on people’s faces. He feels more miserable every day. He cannot find peace or relief in his new friends because he does not want to talk to them. He is not even aware of how important he has become for the four strange people who visit him but he gives them

everything he can. He gives them what he would like to give Antonapoulos, he plays chess by himself and remembers what it was like to play with his friend who did not know how to play and who would throw a fit if he did not get to play with the white pieces.

One night, shortly after Christmas, the other characters happen to go to Singer's room at the same time. He does not understand why they do not talk to each other. He imagines that if he had someone he could talk to, like at the convention for deaf-mutes, he would simply do it. He watches Mick, Jake, Copeland, and Biff Brannon speak, seemingly to each other, but all their words are addressed to him. Then, after a while, they all rise and leave at the same time and he is so puzzled that he decides to write a letter to Antonapoulos. In the letter he tells his beloved friend that "the way I need you is a loneliness I cannot bear" (McCullers, 1940, p. 184). He also tells him about the weird episode with the other characters. He says he thinks the ugly one with the mustache is crazy and is always contradicting himself; he says that the girl knows he is deaf but she thinks he knows about music and he would like to know what it is she hears; he says that the negro doctor is very sick but he cannot go to a hospital because he is black, and he says that Biff Brannon is thoughtful, but that tonight, they were all rude and he does not like it when people do not attend to the feelings of others. He ends his letter saying: "I'm not meant to be alone without you who understand" (185). Klaus Lubers interprets this moment in the novel as revealing the human predicament as seen by the author: "any hope of understanding is illusory; there is no real center of gravity towards which men may flock for help" (Lubers, 1986, p. 35).

Lawrence Graver writes about Singer and his satellites: "The symmetrical obsessions of Singer's four admirers quickly make him a special case, more interesting as a catalyst than as a complex human being; and soon afterwards the admirers themselves take on generalized significance: the adolescent, the idealistic negro, the failed reformer, the philosophical student of human affairs. Through the passion with which each constructs the god he needs, he bears

ironical witness to the many and wayward forms of human mythmaking” (Graver, 1986, p. 54).

It is obvious that Singer is doing with Antonapoulos the very same thing the four characters are doing with him. He attributes qualities to his friend that he does not possess; he has no wish to share his thoughts with anyone but him because in his eyes he sees wisdom. Similarly the other four characters and the people of the town think of him as a wise and understanding, generous man who has seen things others have not.

In order to analyze the lives and transformations of the characters in the novel, it is important to examine « the grotesque » both as literary mode and as a category that broadens the category “freak” in which these characters have been placed by critics.

Flannery O’Connor defines the grotesque in this way:

“When we look at a good deal of serious modern fiction, and particularly Southern fiction, we find this quality about it that is generally described, in a pejorative sense, as grotesque... In these grotesque works, we find that the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to see every day, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life. We find that connections which we would expect in the customary kind of realism have been ignored, that there are strange skips and gaps which anyone trying to describe manners and customs would certainly not have left. Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework. Their fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and the unexpected” (O’Connor, 1961, p. 40).

Sara Gleeson-White (2003) associates the themes of adolescence, spiritual isolation and the identity of women which are some of McCullers’s themes, along with the grotesque, and she quotes some critics who say the writers of the grotesque were influenced by Flaubert and the Russian realists. She also says that there is a discrepancy in the terminology used to

describe the type of writing McCullers practices: “realist”, “gothic” and “grotesque.” She quotes McCullers herself to clarify the term she prefers to use: “In the South during the past fifteen years, a genre of writing has come about that is sufficiently homogeneous to have led critics to label it ‘The Gothic School.’ This tag... is unfortunate. The effect of a Gothic tale may be similar to that of a Faulkner in its evocation of horror, beauty and emotional ambivalence—but this effect evolves from opposite sources; in the former the means used are romantic or supernatural, in the latter a peculiar and intense realism. Modern Southern writing seems rather to be indebted to Russian literature, to be the progeny of Russian realists” (White, 2003, p. 123). Gleeson-White then says that McCullers is probably the only one to call Southern writing realist.

However, Gleeson-White writes that McCullers is placed in yet another category by Ellen Moers in her book *Literary Women*. In this category there are other authors like Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley, Emily Bronte and Christina Rossetti. This tradition, says Moers is “at least as feminine as regional” and defines gothic style as one in which: “fantasy dominates over reality, the strange over the commonplace, and the supernatural over the natural.” There is another critic Gleeson-White quotes, Alan Speigel, who seems to have been able to separate the elements of the classical English gothic and those of the grotesque: “The gothic gesture takes place outside of society in a nightmare setting, while the grotesque gesture takes place within society in the daylight setting of ordinary communal activity” (White, 2003, pp. 124-125).

Most importantly, almost all concepts of realism or gothic or the grotesque have in common the idea of tension between heterogeneous elements. And it is that tension what underpins Gleeson-White’s reading of McCullers’ fiction. She quotes McCullers again to describe the style of both Russian realists and Southern writing: “The technique briefly is this: a bold and an outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense

with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of man with a materialistic detail” (McCullers in White, 2003 p. 125).

This examination of the grotesque allows this essay to focus on the aspects that show tension in the construction and evolution of the major characters and it allows a dynamic reading instead of a narrow one, acknowledging the possibility of becoming these characters offer.

The five protagonists in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* are made up of the juxtaposition of elements that do not seem to go with one another, both in physical and emotional terms. Their use of language can go from scholarly to foul in seconds. Their emotional state can change from the most loving and generous to the most hateful and violent, and although they try to conceal this, to stop their tears and the trembling of their lips or their voice, it always becomes evident for others and that makes them grotesque. The reaction people have to the way the characters act is what causes their impossibility to communicate and sinks them into loneliness and desperation until they find John Singer. A principal theme of the novel is the moral isolation of human beings and their need to create a personal god.

Spencer Carr includes in her analyses excerpts from the outline that McCullers herself created of the novel where she says that her novel is about “five isolated, lonely people in their search for expression and spiritual integration with something greater than themselves” (Carr, 1990, p. 17). McCullers also said in an interview that the novel’s theme and characters reflected her view of the conscience of the South: “The human heart is a lonely hunter—but the search for us southerners is more anguished. There is a special guilt in us...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 that it wasn’t” (Op. cit).

Klaus Lubers suggests that human isolation is not the central theme of the novel. He contends that it is rather the question of truth and illusion:

“Each of the four characters around Singer is in his own way concerned with distinguishing truth from illusion. Biff Brannon, the owner of the New York Café, looks out for truth behind appearances from behind his restaurant counter. He is a realist interested in facts and the whys behind them” (Lubers, 1986, p. 38). But mainly what can be seen is yet another juxtaposition of opposing elements: of fantasy and reality, of love and scorn for the weaknesses of human beings, of fanaticism and rationality which is what builds the characters’ subjectivities and is what leads to their moral and intellectual isolation.

Harold Bloom suggests that all McCullers’s fiction risks the perpetual crisis of Eros which is the tendency to make false connections. He says her characters share that peculiarity in the exercise of their love. “They exist, and eventually expire, by falling in love with a hopeless hope” (Bloom, 1986, p. 2).

Carson McCullers has her own thesis regarding love. She proposes two roles: the lover and the beloved. Both can be of any description and the beloved is basically a stimulus for all the love that lays quiet inside a lover. The lover is always trying to “strip bare” the beloved which is why the beloved fears and hates the lover. Most importantly, the lover knows that his love is a lonely thing and he must create an internal world for it. And although *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is her first novel and the thesis mentioned before is the introduction to *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, she seems to have started exploring this subject from the beginning of her writing practice.

Oliver Evans describes the effect love has in all the characters of the novel: “Ordinary verbal communication results in failure; it is only through ideal communication or love, that men can hope to escape from their cells. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, she dramatizes this idea by causing her protagonist, Singer, to be a deaf mute, and it is not in spite of this

limitation but because of it that his experience in love is the only one, of the several which are depicted in the novel, that is satisfactory—and it is only relatively so, since the object of his love, the half-witted Antonapoulos does not reciprocate it and soon dies. The melancholy message here is that, while love is the only force that can unite men, love is never completely mutual and is subject to time, diminishing with the death of the love object. The single consolation is that love, while it lasts, is beneficial to the lover, affording him temporary relief from his solitude” (Evans, 1986, p. 24). Unfortunately Singer soon loses his source of relief and is left to become the beloved of the other four characters who find that temporary relief in him until he commits suicide.

As time goes on and the relationship of the four visitors with Singer becomes more intimate, their lives transform but seem to be headed towards frustration in many ways. Fortunately, the four visitors are more in control of their emotions and are not as isolated from social discourse as at the beginning.

An important moment in Mick’s life is when she throws a party for her high school classmates. It is a plan that she would not have carried out had she not spoken to Singer about her feelings of insecurity. It is the perfect symbol of the difficulty of going from childhood to womanhood since Mick, for the first time, changes her attire to something more “feminine” and invites her teenage peers. The party ends because some children on her block start playing and running around and although at first she feels angry that her attempt at something more grown-up is ruined, she then joins the children.

When Mick attempts to look feminine during her prom party, it is evident that she feels out of place with her evening dress and her tiara, and when her clothes make her uncomfortable to run she puts on her shorts and shirt again. Gleeson-White writes: “Mick’s self-perception suggests that the tomboy “Mick Kelly” is some essential self, that is, her boyish self. As in Biff Brannon’s case, here it is the other gender that represents the real

self... However, as was made clear, Mick's masculinity is not only a performative mode, as she also feels her "femininity" is, but it also leads to the suspension of such dichotomous gender categories" (White, 2003, p. 88).

Gleeson-White also interprets the deliberate adoption of feminine traits in McCullers's tomboys as using the master's weapons against the master: "Miss Amelia and the tomboys take up the codes that oppress and capture them and use these very same codes as weapons against such absolute identity organization. In doing so, Miss Amelia and the tomboys make a mockery of heterosexual gender organization" (op.cit).

McCullers tomboys are thus freaks because they seem to fail to grasp the role they are supposed to perform in society and according to Judith Butler, "to be improperly gendered is to be less than human." The category of freak seems to entrap these characters, just like stable gender identity does; freakdom is static and it shatters any possibility of becoming, whereas grotesqueness as seen by Bakhtin shows these characters' traits as dynamic, unfinished, without the negative connotation this idea usually has: "McCullers representations of liminal, adolescent subjectivity promise becoming, or at least potential, and so puncture the overwhelming entrapment of freak identity. The trope of the unfinished which is associated with Mick, only serves to underscore this promise. To be unfinished is to participate in an open-ended subjectivity. In Rabelais and his world, Bakhtin writes that the grotesque body 'is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, out-grows itself, transgresses its own limits... this is the ever-unfinished, ever creating body'" (White, 2003, pp. 25-26).

Mick has a friend, Harry Minowitz with whom she used to play when they were little. Lately, Harry is very concerned with the extermination of Jews by the Nazis; he wants to kill Hitler, and she does not really know what to say because she is not very well informed. She both admires and envies Harry's intelligence and possibilities because if he wanted to go to war, he could. Harry also plays an important role in Mick's development since she has her

first sexual experience with him. It is surprising that for both the experience turns out to be traumatic. For Mick it is the inevitable step to womanhood and to the confinement it represents. Harry feels as if he has caused some terrible damage to Mick and he decides to leave the town and find work as a mechanic somewhere else. That makes Mick feel even more trapped; not because she wants to have a relationship with him but because he can leave and she cannot. The awareness of where she is heading is what makes Mick wish to be a boy and dress as one. She wants to conceal her gender and be able to dream of the possibilities she would have if only she did not have the big constraint of being a girl. Her first sexual encounter represents the materialization of her biggest fear which is maturing and it is marked by vulnerability and a sensation of having been cheated although she does not blame Harry Minowitz. Gleeson-White remarks: "It seems that it is sexual intercourse that makes Mick a 'woman,' just as her graffiti 'pussy' positioned her as a commodity in the heterosexual marketplace. Her anatomy marks her gender, which is the very thing her boyish appearance seeks to veil" (White, 2003, pp. 73-74).

A plan that Jake Blount is able to execute is writing pamphlets about his ideals and handing them out to people in the town. He hopes that the people will rise up and hold a demonstration. Unfortunately, he ends up feeling that no one really reads or understands what they read. But the fact that he finally acts instead of only speaking angrily shows that the ideas he communicated to Singer were further developed and that he can always do it again.

Blount also manages to seek a connection with Doctor Copeland whose ideals are similar to his. Although at the beginning of the novel Copeland responded to Blount's attempt to bring him into the New York Café with rage, Blount finds new opportunities to talk to the Doctor. When Copeland is bedridden and very ill, Blount goes to his room to talk to him. It is ironic that both characters are so afraid of meeting each other in spite of the fact that both are Marxists idealists. They heatedly discuss capitalism and the filthy lies that people have been

told in order to remain submissive. When morning comes, they decide it is time to talk about something they have not discussed: the way out. Copeland keeps reminding Blount not to forget about the Negro race, but Blount has a more general picture in mind. He thinks about all races, all the poor people who work for miserable wages to make a few men richer. They mock each other's ideas and their moods change so easily, it is like they are talking to a mirror. Blount then tells Copeland that his plan is similar to chain letters, but since he is not the kind of person to write letters, he would have to go around telling people The Truth and so those people would tell others and so on. Copeland thinks that is a very childish idea and is not afraid of telling Blount. He goes on to explain the plan he has in mind: he has personally written many letters that he intends to deliver personally in hopes that all the people who get a letter will go marching into Washington to demand their freedoms and rights. Blount responds by criticizing this unrealistic proposal arguing that sending a bunch of people to march without them *knowing* does not change anything: "The work has to start at the bottom. The old traditions smashed and the new ones created. To forge a whole new pattern for the world. To make man a social creature for the first time, living in an orderly and controlled society where he is not forced to be unjust in order to survive" (McCullers, 1940, p. 261). Neither of them agrees with the other's ideas despite the fact that they share the same purpose. Jake Blount abandons the room where Copeland lies frustrated and infuriated.

It is possible to see that when these two characters find any kind of criticism to their ideas, their violent reactions surge again. Copeland and Blount are equals but they find it impossible to come to an agreement. They do not need someone to argue with or someone to help them see the flaws in their plans; they need an opportunity to show the rest that by doing what they propose, the society they live in would be in much better conditions.

A major change in Dr. Copeland's life is that he feels he has found a friend in someone who is not a Negro, something he thought impossible. He invites Singer to his

Christmas party where he gives an encouraging speech to the young and the elder of his people. He does not feel angry and his words are very clear for his public. At the sight of the young and old attentive people, he feels a happiness that he has not known for years. He declares that his people are not allowed to serve; that their labor is wasted on useless things; that many young people are denied the dignity of education and wisdom: "Some of you young people here this morning may feel the need to be teachers or nurses or leaders of your race. But most of you will be denied. You will have to sell yourselves for a useless purpose in order to keep alive. You will be thrust back and defeated. The young chemist picks cotton. The young writer is unable to learn to read. The teacher is held in useless slavery at some ironing board. We have no representatives in government. We have no vote. In all of this great country we are the most oppressed of all people. We cannot lift up our voice. Our tongues rot in our mouths from lack of use. Our hearts grow empty and lose strength for our purpose" (McCullers, 1940, p. 164). Thus Doctor Copeland summarizes the critical situation of the Negro people and encourages them to stand up and be whole and free. And then he warns them that the one to save them will not be the Lord they so fervently believe in: "Attention! We will save ourselves. But not by prayers of mourning. Not by indolence or strong drink. Not by the pleasures of the body or by ignorance. Not by submission or humbleness. But by pride. By dignity. By becoming hard and strong. We must build strength for our real true purpose" (op. cit, p. 164).

Unfortunately In the middle of February, Portia tells her father that William, his son has been badly tortured by some white guards in the prison where he was sent after a fight. She tells him that Willie's feet had been amputated because they froze and caught gangrene. It seems that he can no longer hear or understand what his daughter is telling him. He feels that his humiliation has hit rock bottom and he can only feel the misery in him. There is no true purpose strong enough to help him keep his strength; plus, the tuberculosis is consuming him

faster every day. When he hears the news of his son, he waits for something to happen: He “waited for the black, terrible anger as though for some beast out of the night. But it did not come to him. His bowels seemed weighted with lead, and he walked slowly and lingered against fences and the cold, wet walls of buildings by the way. Descent into the depths until at last there was no further chasm below. He touched the solid bottom of despair and there took ease” (McCullers, 1940, p. 219). It is Mick who seems to speak for him when he is sitting in her kitchen listening to his daughter retell the story of William’s torture. She says about the guards: “They ought to be treated just like they did Willie and them. Worse. I wish I could round up some people and kill those men myself” (op. cit, p. 220). He starts thinking about the white men of power he knows, but he has nothing but ill memories associated with them. Finally, he thinks of the superior court judge and goes to see him, but once more, he must face the insolence of the white man and is once again humiliated by one of them. He is unfairly accused of being drunk and when he tries to respond to this, the sheriff hits him in the face and has him dragged into jail. Suddenly, an unknown strength comes to him and he tries to break loose and starts sobbing and laughing at the same time. Unfortunately, he is too weak to fight and the guards hit him mercilessly and abandon him in his cell until the next day. When he is released, there is a little group of people waiting for him and Portia reminds him of the burden he has carried and must go on carrying for his own good: “Father, don’t you know that ain’t no way to help our Willie? Messing around at a white folk’s courthouse? Best thing us can do is keep our mouth shut and wait” (op. cit, p. 225).

The change that occurs in Biff Brannon’s life after his wife dies is that he can embrace his feminine side and fantasize about being a mother without feeling queer. He understands that he is capable of loving and he will continue to love anyone he meets. He comes to this conclusion after analyzing everything that goes on around Singer and the other characters. He understands that Singer was the object of the other characters’ love and that he managed to

give them what they needed and that is the influence Singer has on him. Enabling him to have a clear understanding of how complex love and loneliness are.

When John Singer goes to visit his friend once again, he finds that Antonapoulos has died. Unable to cope with the loss, he returns to his room and kills himself. The loneliness that he has had to endure during his friend's absence has been too painful and knowing that he will never return is too much to bear. The other characters are left to wonder about his death and they feel, probably for the first time, that they really did not know anything about him.

Many critics have suggested Singer is a Christ figure that offers redemption to the other characters. There are many signs throughout the novel that suggest this image. Such as the fact that Portia talks about his shirts as cleaner than a saint's, and the fact that he dies when he is thirty-three years old, supposedly the age that Christ died, and the fact that Singer himself has a dream in which he sees the other four characters kneeling at his feet as he kneels at Antonapoulos'. Other critics like Spencer Carr suggest that it is Brannon who represents the Christ figure since he "accepts and endures his suffering" (Carr, 1990, p. 32).

Related to Spencer Carr's idea and the biblical implications of the novel, Klaus Lubber says: "The bible only reminds Biff of his youth. Jake had even been an ardent believer in Christ during his boyhood... The Christian doctrine has no longer any force in the lives of the characters, except the Negroes. Because they discard it, they have to substitute other truths, and since these prove more or less private ones that cannot be shared or spread out, communication is obstructed. We see each of the four figures strive by themselves, elevating singer to the status of a vicarious savior, a mute monument of their own condition... The meaning which the book finally adds up to is this: Christ's gospel is dead for the protagonists. The substituted truths they embrace are private truths, not comprehensive enough to include others. The most acceptable truth is Biff's. It is Christ's message of love in a secular form which Brannon has arrived at by constantly attempting to solve the riddle of Singer's life, the

hard path toward unrequited human sympathy in an exacting world heading into darkness” (Lubers, 1986, p. 40).

Although Singer is a Christ figure, it is not through his death that he redeems the other four characters, but by what he offers them when he is alive. His generosity and availability, his enigmatic and apparently imperturbable personality, his gentle, reassuring smile help the characters reaffirm their identities. By becoming their object of love, Singer makes them experience, though momentarily, confidence in their ideas and plans. He allows them to explore themselves through his eyes and realize that they have a lot to offer and a lot to work for.

It is not too great a mystery why someone would offer his life so that others find relief from their oppressing loneliness. Singer is able to feel that the other four characters need him, that they think of him as an exceptional being who is the only one capable of understanding them, just like he needs Antonopoulos and thinks he is the only one with whom he can express himself fully. It seems as if through his selflessness he were compensating for his loss. By becoming the recipient of other people’s most precious thoughts and feelings, he fulfills for them a need that will not be fulfilled for him: to create a meaningful connection with someone.

The final moments of the characters in the novel, after singer has died, are not happy endings at all. The causes of the idealists have a long way to go before being realized. The dreams of the developing teenager will not find their way any time soon and the longings of the philosopher of human affairs are only thoughts.

Once Doctor Copeland is feeling better, after having been in bed for a long time, he is sent to the farm with his father-in-law. The morning before his departure he sits in his room; rocking in his chair, feeling his head trembling uncontrollably and thinking about how incredible it is that for forty years his mission was his life and his life his mission and yet

everything remains to be done. He tells Portia that he feels he has failed. There is no one to whom he could bequeath his mission and therefore he feels it cannot be the end. When he gets on the wagon with Grandpapa, Grandpapa tells him how happy he is to have him in the family again: “I believe in all kinfolks sticking together—blood kin and marriage kin. I believe in all us struggling along and helping each other out, and some day us will have a reward in the beyond” (McCullers, 1940, p. 287). Doctor Copeland says he believes in justice now, justice “for us Negroes,” but Grandpapa has already stopped listening and although Doctor Copeland would like to speak in a loud voice, he does not have the strength anymore. All he has now is the trip to the farm.

By the time Singer dies Jake Blount reflects on all the work he has done; all the pamphlets he has written night and day, and he thinks that it has all been a waste of time; that nobody has understood or even read properly what he had to say. Before he leaves the town, he goes to the New York Café to protect himself from a heavy summer rain. He has a small supper, falls asleep and Biff Brannon wakes him up from his recurrent nightmare. He decides to leave even though it is still raining and Brannon hands him a couple of twenty-dollar bills. He feels a new surge of energy and he does not know where he will go. All he knows is that he will not leave the south, for there is hope in him “and soon, perhaps, the outline of his journey would take form” (McCullers, 1940, p. 299). He can go anywhere, since anyway: “I’m part nigger and wop and bohunk and chink. All of those. And I’m Dutch and Turkish and Japanese and American. I’m one who knows. I’m a stranger in a strange land” (op. cit, pp. 18-19).

Mick’s internal world can never really match the external. She feels the change when she starts working at the store: “but now no music was in her mind. That was a funny thing. It was like she was shut out from the inside room. Sometimes a little tune would come and go—but she never went into the inside room with the music she used to do. It was like she was too

tense. Or maybe it was like the store took all her energy and time. Woolsworth's wasn't the same as school. When she used to come home from school she felt good and was ready to start working on the music... and she wanted to stay in the inside room but she didn't know how. It was like the inside room was locked somewhere away from her. A very hard thing to understand" (McCullers, 1940, p. 301). The only thing that inhabits both worlds is Mister Singer, who seems to listen to her and understand her. When Singer commits suicide, she feels cheated and devastated, but Singer's death is not what unchains the events that mark her transition into adulthood. She takes a job at the dime store because her family's poverty requires that she work. The impact Singer has on her life is the possibility—as ephemeral as it is—to communicate, to express her thoughts, and as devastated as she is after his death, the conditions of her external, real world are what shape her adult life.

Harold Bloom sees Mick as McCullers's surrogate in the novel and sees the end of the novel as the triumph of life "over her own integrity, her own hope, her own sense of potential for achievement or of love" (Bloom, 1986, p. 2).

Klaus Lubber sees Mick's final moments, not as the frustration of her dreams but as a change that "consists in crossing over to the outside room without giving up the place in which she had lived for years. In her there is acceptance of reality alongside youthful idealism" (Lubers, 1986, p. 39).

Biff Branon is left surprised and overwhelmed by the mysteries of love and the hardships of loneliness and despair. "In a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who—one word—love. His soul expanded. But for the moment only. For in him he felt a warning; a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended. He saw that he was looking at his own face on the counter glass before him... The left eye delved narrowly into the past while the right gazed wide and affrighted into a future

of blackness, error and ruin. And he was suspended between radiance and darkness. Between bitter irony and faith” (McCullers, 1940, p. 273).

These last words express, once again, the dynamics of the juxtaposition of seemingly opposing elements. How the diverse personality traits come together and make up the characters’ subjectivities as they face the cycles of random circumstances of their lives. Similarly the elements of the novel come together and make it a perfect unified entity. Singer is at the center of the other characters’ lives in spite of being a flat character that is undisturbed by what goes on around him.

The fluidity of time and the mobility of the characters are the main ingredients of this first novel. About the aspect of mobility Gleeson-White writes: “The grotesque in McCullers’s texts, then, has to do with possibility as it makes strange the category “human,” which readers, in turn, are forced to reexamine. McCullers provides a portrait of human activity considered as an unfolding of possibility, even if at times such a process may be painful and subject to compromise. It is this which is at the heart of McCullers’s grotesque portraits” (White, 2003, p. 121).

Finally, although Singer’s death makes the other four characters feel cheated and devastated they have known love. They have been able to communicate, to make a meaningful connection with someone else. They acknowledge and appreciate Singer’s influence in their lives and are ready to move on even if the future seems bleak. These characters that represent opposites of the mainstream values and are somehow punished for their incoherence to their social context are powerful and dynamic, and offer great possibilities of becoming.

5. CONCLUSION

Carson McCullers' first novel deals with the moral and spiritual isolation of human beings as well as with the tensions and dynamics of sexuality and gender, with the frustration and despair of the search for love. Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, Dr. Copeland and Biff Brannon have mysterious and unexpected personalities; they have built their subjectivities almost in opposition to the standards of the town they inhabit. Their ideas and dreams have been mocked and criticized and even feared by those they have tried to communicate with. When they come in contact with John Singer they think they have found someone who understands what they are trying to say and do to change the miserable conditions of their society. They find in Singer the momentary relief that love offers every lover from their eternal loneliness. There is an imaginary relationship from which they derive spiritual nourishment and self-confidence. Singer's presence and availability awaken their best qualities and allow them to reflect on their ideas and plans. They find a kind of redemption in the ability to tell someone what they think without facing ridicule or condemnation.

As a Christ figure Singer serves as a catalyst, as a provider of possibilities, as a vessel or recipient for the characters' development of their personalities. His attitude is selfless; he sacrifices himself, gives himself to the other characters so that they feel that their need for a significant connection is possible. He serves them as a mirror that reflects their best qualities and enhances their worth as human beings. He helps them feel capable and strong and valued. The redemption Singer offers the other four characters does not imply that the circumstances of their lives improve: poverty, inequality, injustice, violence, exploitation and oppression do not cease to exist. Their lives are complicated and seemingly doomed to frustration simply due to the circumstances that life brings so randomly. In that sense, the characters succeed in their quest to reaffirm their identity; they elaborate their thoughts and are able to devise ways to cope with the fact that they are different and always changing.

The tensions that characters like Mick Kelly and Biff Brannon face in terms of sexuality and gender identity are seen not as part of a freakish identity but as part of a dynamic grotesque identity that is not static but always moving and changing. Their androgyny is yet another expression of the juxtaposition of opposing elements that make up that peculiar intense realism of McCullers' fiction. Although Mick and Biff do not talk to Singer about these tensions, it is evident throughout the novel how they deal with and embrace the apparent contradiction of the desire to defy the restrictions of their genders. What seems to be a surrendering to their entrapped conditions is more a coming to terms with the changes in their lives, never giving up their idea of a more open-ended gender identity.

Singer allows the other four characters to express the traits of their personalities, to find and settle on the inner coherence of which Flannery O'Connor talks about in her definition of the grotesque. They might not accommodate to some social patterns and are actually against some of them such as racism, sexism, capitalism, and the selfishness that characterizes ordinary life in the town where they live, but they learn to embrace themselves, to have confidence in what they do. In that sense, they embody the very definition of what the grotesque is without the negative connotation the word might have. They cannot settle for the established course of action in a society that lacks fairness and equality. Theirs is a lonely quest for a meaningful connection.

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