

# The heart: a lonely hunter



Man's search for spiritual fulfillment in their lifelong escape from emotional isolation has been a common theme in literature of all cultures. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by Carson McCullers, a feminist American writer, this spiritual search is reflected in the lives of four isolated, lonely people in the deep south of the 1940s through their search for self-expression and spiritual integration with something greater than themselves. With confusion towards God and animosity toward country, it is small wonder that McCullers creates a fictional world of characters that long for a "spiritual" home. McCullers's deep understanding of true loneliness and the transience of life offer readers a greater scope into humanity, showing a paradoxical truth that man's heart is trapped in a perennial chase for a pursuit greater than themselves, and that man fulfills this spiritual longing by seeking consolation from nonexistent illusions built from imagination. This human tendency of appeasing loneliness by filling the emptiness of ordinary, quotidian life through imagination is depicted in the characters Jake Blount and Mick Kelley, all visitors of the deaf-mute John Singer, in whom they find spiritual consolation by sharing their greatest, innermost thoughts. The imagination of each visitor renders them to deify John Singer as an all-knowing man who has the ability to understand their deepest struggles and pursuits. However, the power Singer possesses is in truth only mirror-like, a reflection of his visitors, who imagine divine characteristics in him to fill the empty voids in their own beings. The heart's pursuit to escape loneliness with a lifelong "hunt" of spiritual fulfillment proves to be utterly unattainable through the final disillusionment of John Singer and his visitors, Copeland, Blount, and Mick Kelley.

Reflecting the macrocosm black civil rights movement in the 20th century, Doctor Copeland, a black man suppressed by the racist society of the Deep South, longs deeply for self-expression and is one of the first to deify Singer as a Christ-like figure. Jan Whitt suggests, “ McCullers points out the emptiness of self-reliance in her characterization of the confident Copeland, who cries to his audience, ‘ we will save ourselves...by dignity’ (3). However, contrary to her ideas, under Copeland’s façade of conviction and energy, he secretly struggles with self-expression and finds his lonely heart wandering without aim in hope to connect with other people. Copeland’s innermost fragility is revealed to readers as his daughter asks, “ you have grand lights...it don’t seem natural why you all the time sit in the dark”, and Copeland replies dejectedly, “ the dark suits me” (McCullers 61). Copeland’s ideals to bring racial pride to his people, who are often times portrayed as timorous or unmotivated throughout the novel, brings Copeland continuous despair, which leads him to long for identification with the members of other oppressed races, such as believing that the deaf-mute, Singer, is a Jew and thus shares similar racial struggles. Copeland’s innermost fears cast him in the shadows of failed self-expression, and as a result he would express all his repressed thoughts to Singer, for he felt that the mute would always understand whatever he wanted to say to him. As a deaf man, Singer most likely does not truly interpret Copeland’s struggles, but because of his seemingly compassion, he is nevertheless entrusted with the black man’s idealistic deification. As described by McCullers, “ Copeland held his head in his hands...from his throat came the strange sound like a kind of singing moan. He remembered [Singer’s] face when he smiled behind the yellow match flame on that rainy night—and peace was in him” (77). Though

Singer's profundity is perhaps only an imagined illusion, Singer's placid complexion offers Copeland paramount empathy throughout Copeland's racial battles with the southern society. However, the novel paradoxically exonerates readers from any real engagement of racial change since all Copeland's efforts come to nothing concrete. Indeed, the idealism in Copeland's racial struggles and his spiritual dependence on Singer may not have brought a noticeable impact to southern society, but Copeland's character in itself fully stands to articulate McCullers's viewpoint that man has an innate tendency to romanticize and deify others in attempt to appease their isolating loneliness and to console themselves in times of failure.

While Copeland advocates for black civil rights, Blount represents the battered anima of the lower class. Similarly, however, just as Copeland's political struggles bring him to seek spiritual restoration from Singer, Blount's deep inquiries about life and God also cause him to seek solace in Singer's camaraderie. One literary critic comments on Blount's confusion towards God, revealing the spiritual distortion of soul which further deepens Blount's ambiguity in religion, his loss of faith in an existence greater than himself: "[he] threw himself into the arms of fundamentalist Christianity—with its wailing soloists, damnation sermons...the Jesus he met demanded crucifixion, annihilation of self" (Murray 5). In essence, as a wanderer from town to town, Blount searches for spiritual belonging through religion but is ultimately deceived, finding no spiritual identification with the Christ for which he had so desperately sought for. Demoralized about religion, he willingly confides his view on life to the deaf-mute Singer, with an idealized

hope that somehow, Singer's silent countenance will allow him to comprehend his deepest philosophies. Blount's agonized spending of words indeed portrays the poverty of his soul and Singer's presence seems to teach him to express his repressed emotions: "[his] words came out as though a dam inside him had broken" (McCullers 20). Unable to respond, no ordinary remark escapes Singer's lips and thus he disillusioned no one. Blount's deification of Singer as an omniscient figure encourages him to speak his whole mind, portraying the fact that communication is the only access to love, conscience, nature, God, and to the dream. McCullers writes in *The Mortgaged Heart*, "there is a deep need in man to express himself by creating some unifying principle or God" (9). All people seek for Christ, the author believes, no matter how they define him, no matter what they create him to be. Blount chooses a flesh-and-blood hero to take the place of the prophet, drawing parallels between Singer and Christ. Just as Jesus healed the diseased and the moribund, Singer's tranquil fellowship has a therapeutic affect on his visitors, mending Blount's spiritual emptiness. Blount's failure in finding God and the greater truth during his nomadic lifestyle causes him to instead deify Singer as the ultimate "God", an idealized figure rendered by his imagination which is merely a reflection of his own idealistic traits.

Divergent to both Copeland and Blount's quests, which mirrors the greater struggles of class and race, Mick Kelley's driving desires are more focused on personal fulfillment and is representative of the young, female ambience in the 1940s and their pursuit for spiritual integration. Alleviating loneliness through musical and artistic endeavors, when she listens to Beethoven's

compositions, Mick feels “ like she could knock down all the walls of the house and then march through the street big as a giant” (McCullers 214). Music echoes the sound of man’s soul, and similar to the way Blount finds temporary spiritual belonging through occasional self-expression, Mick finds spiritual belonging through the sound of music. However, she must find pleasure in Beethoven’s symphonies alone, as no one else displays an appreciation for music, causing her eternal, isolating loneliness. Through Mick’s search for identification with other human beings, she too idolizes Singer as a ‘ home-made God’ to find internal consolation. One critic writes that the selflessness of Singer “ encompasses his fellows, making them long for the solace of his quiet spirit...the room in which he sits communicates acceptance. They come face to face with the mute and meet themselves” (Witt 8). Though Singer cannot hear, Mick ironically imagines him as the only person who possesses the ability to understand musical ambience and its transcendence of the soul’s battling cries. Portraying the frailty of language and the ultimate failure of self-expression, it is up to Singer, incompetent in both speaking and hearing, to teach Mick the art of communicating with others to appease spiritual isolation. It is not through the clamor of the cities, but through the individual’s search for spiritual connections that we can finally escape this perennial loneliness. Through Mick’s artistic deification of Singer, she further accentuates the element of idealism and articulates the author’s own view on delusional deification, as Mick eventually comes closer than any other character in recognizing that her views on Singer are merely an illusion. Music notes fall taciturn as Mick matures and the jarring reality of society looms, “ everybody...knew there wasn’t any real God...When she thought of what she used to imagine was God she could only see Singer with

a long, white sheet around him. God was silent...” (McCullers 101-2). In retrospect, Mick Kelley, though young and inexperienced in comparison to Copeland and Blount, is the only character to analyze her lionization of Singer. Mick finally realizes her desire to create Singer as a heroic figure who can save and unscramble the puzzle of existence, and her rational revelation depicts that illusionary deification is only a temporary spiritual fulfillment. Therefore, Singer’s wide range of visitors symbolizes various social, sexual, and racial positions, suggesting that the causes of failure in their individual quests cannot be restricted to any given position, since all experience discouragement and disillusionment.

However, what Copeland, Blount, and Mick cannot understand is that the purveyor of peace and sanity, is not peace itself. Although Singer cushions the painful loneliness of the other characters, he is indeed the loneliest “hunter” of them all. The man with “gentle eyes as grave as a sorcerer’s” (McCullers 67), he makes the same mistake as his visitors as he deifies and lionizes his companion Antonapoulos, a psychologically incompetent man who does not replicate his feelings or understands them. One critic describes the relationship between Antonapoulos and Singer as “a human relationship of love and sexuality at furthest remove from so-called normal relationships...it is an unconsummated and, indeed, sexually unacknowledged relationship between two deaf-mute male homosexuals of completely incompatible personalities” (Whitt 9). Singer’s devotion towards Antonapoulos is absolute, spiritual, and beyond question, for in Singer’s every waking thought they were eternally united. Unlike the way Copeland, Blount, and Mick Kelley finds consolation by voicing their thoughts out loud,

Singer's inability to speak causes him even greater illusions as he depends on imagination to fill the empty voids within him, bringing him to invest all his spiritual being on his companion, who he deifies as being distinct from the other deaf-mutes. Singer too needs others and must suffer in loneliness without a confessor.

There exists a fundamental difference between Singer and the others.

Whereas Singer's whole being is invested in his imaginary construction of a perfect Antonopoulos, whose happiness is Singer's only source of satisfaction, the others are not truly concerned with Singer's happiness.

Their relationship to him resembles that of "the patient and the psychiatrist, a site for projection and transfer" (Murray 5). Spiritual isolation damns

Singer: his song is never heard. McCullers represents her regret that selfless love is a rarity and is apt to be evanescent when Antonopoulos's death reaches Singer and he, feeling completely isolated and disillusioned, chooses to commit suicide. This causes a sense of betrayal that infects the spirits of

Copeland, Blount, and Mick. An aging Copeland travels full circle and once again needs to speak: "the words in his heart grew big and they would not be silent...there was no one to hear them" (McCullers 287). Blount stumbles through a darkened town in search of a dead messiah, and remembers "all

the innermost thoughts that he had told to Singer, and with his death it seemed to him that they were all lost" (McCullers 291). Grown up, working as a clerk in Woolworth's, Mick too faces the end of her dreams. Singer's

death does not only symbolize one individual's lost hope, but single-

handedly murders the 'empty' dreams of all his visitors, showing that deification on an individual only provides temporary spiritual fulfillment, but

deification on an individual only provides temporary spiritual fulfillment, but



true escape from this perennial loneliness lies within a form of love to be reached which lies beyond the social and personal.

Readers identify with the characters John Singer and his visitors, Copeland, Blount, and Mick Kelley not because of their gender, race, or religion, but because as one they portray that the heart's quest to escape perpetual loneliness by 'hunting' for spiritual fulfillment is utterly unattainable. The author's viewpoint on this puzzling truth fully articulated through Brannon the shopkeeper's final conclusion, suggests that the solution to escape isolating loneliness is perhaps beyond our reach: "the question flowed through [Brannon] unnoticed, like the blood in his veins... in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle...of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time; of those who labored and those who were loved" (McCullers 301). The disillusionment of Singer's visitors all intermix to create an impression of man's search of limitlessness, a bond with the universe, in which the individual's perception of the boundaries between self and others might be temporarily effaced when their imaginations give them abilities to deify traits of divinity in others, leaving them with a sudden sense of being at one with the world.

## **Works Cited**

McCullers, Carson. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. North Carolina: Houghton Mifflin, 1940. Print.

Murray, Jennifer. "Approaching Community in Carson McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*." *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2004): 4-7. Bloom's Literary Reference Online. Web. 17 Mar. 2012..

<https://assignbuster.com/the-heart-a-lonely-hunter/>

Whitt, Jan. "The Loneliest Hunter." *Southern Literary Journal* 24. 2 (Spring 1992): 26-35. *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*. Ed. Linda Pavlovski. Vol. 155. Detroit: Gale, 2005. Literature Resource Center. Web. 5 Mar. 2012..