

The sociology of carson mccullers' the heart is a lonely hunter essay sample

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Some of the many functions of society, demonstrated by the interactions of the four major characters, are explored in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter. Overall, this novel is an exploration of the human need for belonging and acceptance. On other levels, however, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter explores the function of social groups and how they interact.

It is tempting to look at the characters of this book and argue that society has progressed greatly since the time in which the story is set. However, some of the social institutions that the author examines are still in place. Socialism, although no longer quite so favored, still has its believers. Racism is still prevalent. Finally, the isolation of those individuals who are different than the majority is still practiced today. This paper will be used to examine those social institutions in terms of the action that takes place in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter.

Socialism

This novel is set during a tumultuous time in world history. The 1930s not only led up to world war, but they were also a time of intense poverty, social exploration, and radical politics. The conditions that existed at that time would be difficult to duplicate, given that the world has changed significantly since that time. Unions and unemployment insurance protect the worker. There is a minimum wage and a regulated work week. Rules that provide guidance for safe and effective workplaces are in effect. None of these things existed, however, at the time of this story. Socialism was a popular ideal, commonly perceived as a total fix for the plight of the common worker. Although some of the basic concepts of socialism have been

discredited today, the basic needs that socialism was intended to fulfill are still imperative today. Jake is the stereotypical image of a socialist reformer.

He is an angry and drunken pseudo-intellectual at odds with modern society.

He says that people who “do know” about the purported truth of socialism view the country as “a crazy house,” in which “men have to rob their brothers in order to live” (McCullers 152). Jake, now a different kind of evangelist from that which he had originally imagined himself, becomes frustrated at his inability to make people understand in the same manner by which he had originally been brought to his own understanding. He becomes calm, however, when Singer appears to understand what Jake has been telling him. Socialism, like any other message, requires unity to survive.

Racism

Although Dr. Copeland is perhaps the most articulate and educated of McCuller's characters, he is also one of the most misunderstood. Copeland, too, is a Marxist, with ideas that are as radical as Jake's ideas. Like Jake, he believes in freeing the impoverished worker and like Jake, he is unable to find anyone who can understand and support his ideas. Unlike Jake, however, Copeland has a firm understanding of the message of Marxism and can articulate it—a bit too well. His extremely intelligent and intellectual ideas are delivered more eloquently than are those of Jake; however, they are met with no greater success.

In large part this difficulty comes not with an inability to communicate his ideas. Rather, the inability comes with racism, both from the white

community and from his own family. Copeland has difficulty communicating with the white members of society due to the widely held perception that black members of society are somehow inferior. In addition, he has trouble communicating with his family and other members of the black community because they have largely accepted the white point of view. His own understanding of the Spinoza that he reads is imperfect, but he makes the effort to weed through the “ intricate play of ideas and the complex phrases” (McCullen 90).

This effort stands in sharp contrast to his daughter Portia’s language and behavior when she brings him his evening meal. Not only does she speak in a patois, she also seems offended when her father suggests the concept of family planning. It is clear that he feels his daughter is not alone in her willful ignorance. He seems unsurprised at her story about the con run by a black man against his own people—not so different from the black-on-black violence that occurs today. It does, however, come as something of a surprise to him that he offends other members of the black community by using the word “ Negro” and for his aggressive attempts to educate them. Regardless, in a sort of racism against his own race, he maintains that he is doing what is best and will not change.

Other-ism

Isolation exists between different groups in the community. At the time this novel was written, isolation between groups led to suspicion and a lack of respect that existed outside of racism; it was just as easy to suspect another white person if you were white as it was to suspect a black person. Biff

observes the interactions in the bar without becoming involved. He watches Jake drink himself drunk for twelve days, he watches Singer drink his coffee alone, isolated in the middle of the room, until Jake begins to direct his “cataract” of words to the deaf-mute (McCullen 17).

Isolation and mistrust are a central theme in this novel. At times, it seems as though the barriers between different groups break down and begin to retreat. When such understanding occurs, however, this understanding is based on an illusion. Singer, for example, is not accepted for who he is or despite who he is; rather, he's accepted for what he can do for the individuals that apparently accept him. Interestingly, despite attempts at unity in the past, society still divides the population between groups. Today, special interest groups and those with other affiliations are proud to differentiate themselves due to “pride” over their heritage separate groups. Diversity is the watchword, while unity is abandoned, thus breaking down the cohesive nature of a functioning society.

Conclusion

Many social institutions still exist that existed at the time that this book was written. Although it is tempting to distance ourselves from the setting of The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, not as much has changed as we think it might have.