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Hopelessness and Despair: Alienation and Oppression in
The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers

A thesis
presented to
the faculty of the Department of English
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree
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by
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August 2003

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ABSTRACT

Hopelessness and Despair: Alienation and Oppression in
The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers

by

Stacey Reece

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter thrust Carson McCullers onto the literary scene at the age of 23. The year was 1940, and anticapitalistic fervor was at its peak. McCullers, familiar with the writings of Karl Marx, expresses in this novel her concern for the exploited classes, her disdain for a materialistic society that keeps the masses oppressed, and her conviction that societal reform was desperately needed. Marxist theory is evident in every aspect of this novel, from the characters to the setting. Alienation, failure to communicate, poverty, and an atmosphere of despair permeate the work. A product of the Great Depression era, McCullers was familiar with poverty; like many other intellectuals of the time, she embraced Marxism for its commitment to rid the world of this evil. This novel, arguably her finest, displays the influence that Marxist philosophy had on McCullers's perception of society.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Karl Marx is considered by many to be one of the most influential thinkers in recorded history. His influence has spread across geographical as well as political boundaries; the United States has definitely felt the impact of his words. While Marxism continues to be studied in the United States today, its heyday in America was during the period of the 1930s. Carson McCullers, along with other literary intellectuals of the '30s, found herself absorbed in conversations in which Marx was the main topic. The Marxist ideas she and her contemporaries passionately discussed are present in her first novel, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, which deals with oppression and exploitation in a Southern cotton mill society.

In Capital Karl Marx says, "Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil, slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole" (661). Nowhere is the truth of this statement more evident than in the American South of the 1930s. Textile mills were numerous in the South during this time, as was the number of people in poverty. Most of the textile workers in the South never joined labor unions, for in the event of a strike, they could have been easily replaced by other workers drawn from the large pool of unskilled and semiskilled laborers (Cooper and Terrill 657). The Southern mill laborers desperately needed the employers; it was not the employers who desperately needed them. As a result, the laborers found themselves in a quandary:

Since precisely for the fact that labour depends on nature it follows that

the man who possesses no other property than his labour power must, in all conditions of society and culture, be the slave of other men who have made themselves the owners of the material conditions of labour. He can work only with their permission, hence live only with their permission.

(Marx, "Marginal Notes" 13)

The Southern mill worker's continued existence was in the hands of the employer; work could be terminated at any time, which could quite possibly lead to the laborer's demise as well as the family's. Therefore, the laborer's hopelessness and apathy in the face of such a dilemma is easy to ascertain. So, while the rest of the country was experiencing the beginnings of labor reform, the South was mired in the status quo. Workers in other parts of the country were seeing increases in wages, but in the South thousands of laborers were still being paid an extremely low wage, barely enough for one person to live on. In addition, labor in these textile mills was not performed exclusively by adults; children the age of twelve and sometimes even younger spent many long hours operating looms in cotton mills (Werstein 60).

Carson McCullers viewed this oppression often. In *Illumination and Night Glare*, her unfinished autobiography, McCullers speaks of her childhood in Columbus, Georgia, and says, "We were exposed so much to the sight of humiliation and brutality, not physical brutality, but the brutal humiliation of human dignity which is even worse" (56). She recognized at an early age that there was "something fearful and wrong with the world" (McCullers, *Illumination* 13). Social reform, in the eyes of Carson McCullers, was desperately needed in the South. The United States of America was supposed to be the epitome of humanity and culture. Human rights and human dignity were of extreme

importance in the speeches of many of the country's prominent people. In words they were sympathetic to the plight of the oppressed, but their deeds contradicted their words. Georg Lukacs, a Marxist critic, explains this phenomenon by saying, "The fascist tendencies arising today in the USA work with the method of a nihilistic hypocrisy. They carry out the suppression and exploitation of the masses in the name of humanity and culture" ("Responsibility" 270). The workers could be helped, it was explained, by forming and joining unions, but at times unions seemed to be nothing more than another facet of capitalist society. "The union's normal course of development is marked by a continuous decline in the revolutionary spirit of the masses. The union increases their material strength, but weakens or completely destroys their appetite for conquest" (Gramsci 109). As previously stated, many Southern textile workers did not join unions. Those who did became satisfied with the small concessions given to them by their employers.

The poor working conditions and wages in the South were not relegated to textile workers; most all laborers in the South lived in much different conditions than did their Northern counterparts. One disparity between the two was wages, both hourly and yearly. Southern workers were paid sixteen cents an hour less, and their annual wage was 426 dollars less than the national average (Wecter 160-61). The work was not different, but the pay was. So many people were unemployed during the Thirties that workers who "raised a fuss" over their wages could be easily replaced. Therefore, the workers chose to take whatever pay they were given; after all, they at least had a job. These low wages gave obvious benefits to the employers. They made more money because they did not have to pay the laborers in the South as much as they would have in

other regions. Many of these “civic elites” were extremely active in politics and fashioned urban policy (Cooper and Terrill 613). Their pockets were being lined by the work of the Southern laborer, and generally no disputes were organized well enough to gain any results. It would not be prudent for them to formulate any policy that would increase wages for the workers, for in doing so the policy makers would be decreasing income for themselves. Therefore, the Southern worker remained mired in low wages. This was true for both black and white laborers; less advantaged whites received practically the same amount of services and facilities as blacks, which amounted to barely anything (Cooper and Terrill 615).

Health proved to be another area of large disparity between laborers in the North and those in the South. In the South more than “half the people, rural and urban, were ill-housed; sickness and death rates ran unusually high, with from sixty to eighty-eight per cent of the poorer urban families ill-fed and more persons dying without medical attendance than anywhere else in the country” (Wecter 161). This discrepancy between the health of workers from different regions can be traced back to economics. People were ill-housed in the South because their wages were lower; shacks in slums were all they could afford. Workers in the South were ill-fed because their wages were lower; they did not have as much money to spend on food as even the poorest Northern laborer. Southern laborers died without receiving medical attention because their wages were lower; they could not afford a doctor’s care. Their meager wages were spent on basic necessities of food, shelter, and clothing, and even these most basic of needs were on a substandard level. The laborers in the American South of the Great Depression era, no matter their skin color or place of employment, were exploited on a far greater plane than

those in the North. McCullers viewed this exploitation and poverty among the Southern mill worker on a daily basis as a child.

Lula Carson Smith (McCullers) was born in Columbus, Georgia, in February of 1917; coincidentally, this is the same year as the Russian Revolution. The Smith family did not live in the depths of poverty; however, it was not among the elite families of Columbus, either. Her home was in a respectable part of town, although this section of town was quickly becoming run-down. The home was very close to the large cotton mill that employed most of the population of Columbus. Growing up during the Depression years, McCullers saw first-hand the plight of many impoverished people in her hometown. She was a curious child; she and a childhood friend made frequent ramblings through the slums where the mill workers lived and through the shaded, tree-lined avenues where the wealthy inhabitants of Columbus resided. This disparity between the living conditions of the rich and poor was forever impressed in her young mind (Cook 4). As an adult, McCullers remained intensely interested in the plight of the Southern mill-worker. As previously stated, the Southern mills seemed to be making no headway whatsoever in industrial organization or labor unions. When McCullers toured the mills, she “viewed with distress the squalid conditions and pervading hopelessness among the people” (Carr 57). Few or no safety regulations were in place; many of the workers were injured or even killed while working. It seemed to her that the employers had no interest in the value of human life, only in the value of the almighty dollar. This made her “increasingly aware of what she considered to be the weaknesses of her country’s capitalistic system” (Carr 57). McCullers was blessed with a kind, caring nature; she could not believe that the mill workers were living and working in such poor, dangerous

conditions, and nobody was doing anything to correct the situation or make things any better for the working class. Carson McCullers possessed an acute social consciousness, and because no one else seemed to want to right the social wrongs, she felt a responsibility and took it upon herself to make the nation aware of the plight of oppressed people (Carr 135). The sense of social responsibility she felt is evident in her writing, for it was writing she eventually chose as her medium to expose the nation to the horrible practice of social injustice among the oppressed classes of the South.

In the spring of 1935, Carson McCullers made a move that would have a profound impact on the rest of her life; she moved to New York City. A gifted pianist, McCullers intended to study music at Julliard, but her money was stolen on a subway. As a result, she was employed in various menial jobs during the day while studying creative writing at Columbia at night. This change of study had a tremendous effect on McCullers's life. She eventually made her residence at 7 Middagh Street in Brooklyn. This move put her in direct contact with many other literary and artistic giants of the age, for some of the other residents in the house over the years were Richard Wright, Gypsy Rose Lee, Salvador Dali, Archibald MacLeish, and W.H. Auden. The Brooklyn house was never empty and never boring. Being around these intellectuals was an important factor in McCuller's growth and development as a social realist writer; she "corresponded rather closely to the stereotype of the Bohemian intellectual of the middle to late Thirties" (Evans 35). She was now in constant contact with intellectuals of the age. The move to New York City was also important for another reason; Carson McCullers was now embedded in a community where poverty ran amok. Although

people in the South experienced more extreme poverty than their Northern counterparts, those in the North were feeling the effects of the Depression as well:

Jobs were scarce in New York City in the mid-thirties, especially for the workers and laborers. It was the decade of the Great Depression, and although Carson had seen abject poverty in her mill town of Columbus, Georgia, it had usually been across the tracks or over by the river. Now she lived with it all around her and inevitably began to depict it in her writings. (Carr 43)

McCullers's social consciousness could not be at ease if she did nothing while poverty abounded all around her. Her sympathetic nature demanded that she write about poverty, how people became poor, and what kept them in poverty.

Also focused in New York City at this time was the Young Communist League, which was in its prime during the years 1935 to 1939 (Britten and Brash 155). Marxist ideas and anticapitalistic fervor were everywhere during this time, and the intellectual society, voraciously engrossed in the writings of Karl Marx, composed what was known as the "backbone of the Communist movement" (Andrist 243). Intellectuals of the Thirties tended to be very socially minded, and Communist ideology fit well with their idea of needed social reform. The decade the Thirties was a time when "it seemed that the Communist party would gain and maintain a monopoly in the realm of the intellectuals, so explosive was the reaction for the apparent final collapse of the capitalist economy among warm-thinking, socially minded men and women of ideas and art" (Shachtman 14). It was one of these intellectuals, Edwin Peacock, who encouraged McCullers to read Karl Marx. McCullers did just that and became entrenched in the

anticapitalist attitude that was prevalent in the late 1930s (Carr 38). Peacock also introduced McCullers to her future husband, Reeves McCullers; these three great friends spent many nights studying and discussing the philosophy of Karl Marx as “rapt disciples” (Carr 49).

Though it was Peacock who encouraged McCullers to read the works of Karl Marx, it was Reeves McCullers who helped her fully develop her sympathy for the proletariat. Reeves McCullers was a man who empathized with all oppressed people, regardless of race, and he did not even try to disguise his disdain for a capitalist system that rewarded people for their labor with only half enough money to cover their cost of living (Carr 94). After Reeves and Carson married, they lived in Fayetteville, North Carolina, for a brief time. She saw there the same type of hopelessness and despair in the faces of the mill workers that was present in the mill workers of Georgia. It was obvious to Carson McCullers that economic depravity among factory workers was running rampant in the entire South. Once again she was observing how the debilitating power of the Southern economy and social system was denying the individual a sense of worth (McDowell 115).

Some of Carson McCullers’s favorite authors were the Russian realists of the nineteenth century. The works of such writers as Dostoevsky, Chekov, Tolstoy, Gogol, and Turgenev had a tremendous impact on her; she read the novels of these men voraciously (Carr 32-33). As a result of reading the works of nineteenth-century Russian realists, McCullers found many similarities between the twentieth-century American South and nineteenth-century Russia. Both societies, according to McCullers, had as a dominant characteristic the cheapness of human life, both had a definite peasant class,

and both had citizens who were living in extreme poverty (McCullers, “Russian Realists” 254). Karl Marx, although he did not live to see twentieth-century America, saw the anti-slavery movements in both Russia and the United States as events of the utmost importance in the world. In one of his personal letters Marx states, “In my opinion, the biggest things now happening in the world are, on the one hand, the American slave movement, started by the death of [John] Brown, and the slave movement in Russia, on the other” (“Personal Letters” 247). Surely, though, Marx, had he lived into the twentieth century, would have seen the similarities between old Russia and the American South. Both regions were mainly agrarian, backward both culturally and economically, and isolated from other regions. Antonio Gramsci, speaking of Russia, says:

A country of extensive agriculture isolates individuals and prevents any uniform and widespread awareness: it makes impossible proletarian social units and the concrete class consciousness that gives people an indication of their own strength and the will to establish a regime legitimized on a permanent basis by that strength. (51)

Even though this statement was written about Russia, it is easy to see how it applies to the American South as well. The South has long been an agricultural region, with a rich history of massive plantations. The agricultural society of the South has also been isolated from the rest of the nation; the Southern culture, economic structure, and even speech patterns are noticeably different from other regions of the United States. Because of this widespread agrarian lifestyle and isolation from other parts of the country, the Southern “peasants,” like the peasants of Russia, were not aware of their class. They did not possess the intellectual capacity to bring about a change in their

situation because they were not aware that a change needed to take place. The laborers McCullers came into contact with felt no sense of pride, no self-worth, because the capitalistic system they were living under took it from them. Sometimes it seemed that the desperation these people felt was so strong that life no longer held any value for them; the struggle to survive in such an oppressive system was too hard. The easiest thing to do would be to give up and die.

Karl Marx explains this loss of self-worth and diminished zest for life as an oppressive tool of the capitalists:

They mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work, and turn it into a hated toil [. . .] they distort the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour-process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the juggernaut of capital. (Capital 661)

If the laborer is “degraded” and turned into a mere “fragment,” it is easy to see why McCullers saw the look of desperation and hopelessness on the faces of the Southern mill workers. Their worth was measured in their output, not at all in their lives. McCullers states her own observation of the South in her essay “The Russian Realists and Southern Literature” as a “society in which a system of values is so uncertain that who can say if a man is worth more than a load of hay, or if life itself is precious enough to justify the struggle to obtain the material objects necessary for its maintenance” (255). The Southern mill workers believed that the struggle for existence was endless. The money

never seemed to be enough for the Southern mill worker. It was a daily mental struggle for many workers to decide if life was really worth living in the squalid, impoverished conditions that they had to bear.

As early as 1931, many writers were stating that the state of the nation was their responsibility (Hicks 84). People everywhere were living in poverty; society was not taking care of its own. This was a flaw that demanded to be rectified in the eyes of writers. Society needed a drastic change. Marxist ideology was at its peak in the United States in the Thirties, and many writers embraced it, thinking that the program of the Communist party was fundamental to rebuilding American society (Hicks 85). Many writers of this decade, John Dos Passos and Upton Sinclair being two of the best known, followed the socialist form of writing to expose society's injustice to the nation. According to Georg Lukacs, literature has great social power, for it "depicts the human being directly and with the full richness of his inward and outward life [. . .] is able to portray the contradictions, struggles, and conflicts of social life in the same way as these appear in the mind and life of actual human beings" ("Marx" 143). Carson McCullers demonstrates the social power of literature in her novels. The characters are easy to identify with; the conflicts and struggles they face are realistic. These are the types of struggles that people, real people, experience. The characters Carson McCullers creates face problems with poverty, racism, unrequited love, and exhausting labor, none of which are foreign to her readers. These are real problems that happen to real people.

Terry Eagleton is a Marxist critic who offers an opinion of what true socialist literature consists of. He states the objective of socialist literature as "describing the real mutual relations, breaking down conventional illusions about them, it shatters the

optimism of the bourgeois world, although the author does not offer any definite solution” (46). Literature, in Eagleton’s opinion, should give the reader “the experience of what it feels like to live in a particular society rather than only an analysis” (18). McCullers adheres to Eagleton’s opinion of the objectives of literature in her novels. When reading a McCullers novel one can feel the summer sun as it beats down on the town. One can feel the weight of alienation and loneliness on the soul. One can feel the anguish, despair, and negative outlook on life. McCullers has a rare gift of making the readers feel as though they are walking the streets with Mick, visiting Biff Brannon’s café, or watching violence unfold at the Sunny Dixie Show. The reader knows what it is like to live in a community in one of the novels of Carson McCullers, for she has the ability to place the reader there. In writing of the relationship between classes, McCullers never divulges the secret of how things can change for the better; offering society a solution is not the main goal of socialist literature. Her task is to paint a picture of society as it is. As a result, racism is not abolished in her novels, the working class is not relieved of its oppression, and people do not live “happily ever after.” This may be upsetting to some of her readers; nevertheless, she follows true Marxist form in her writing and depicts the problems, not the solutions.

When Carson McCullers burst onto the literary scene in 1940 at the age of 23 with the publication of her first novel, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, she became virtually an overnight success. It is this novel that has the clearest, most easily observable elements of Marxism of all McCullers’s novels. Leslie Fiedler makes the claim that The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is “the last of the ‘proletarian novels,’ a true Depression book” (qtd. in Millichap 11). McCullers’s association with Edwin Peacock

and Reeves McCullers was fresh and intense at this time; she credits Peacock for helping develop her liberal ideas. She states in Illumination and Night Glare, “He introduced me to Karl Marx and Engels, that was one of the things that furthered my thinking about justice” (13). As for Reeves McCullers, she states, “He also talked of Marx and Engels, and I knew he was a liberal, which was important, to my mind, in a backward Southern community” (Illumination 16). The discussions she had with these two men about the philosophy of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels made a lasting impression on her mind.

Carson McCullers entered the first version of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, which she originally titled The Mute, in a contest sponsored by Houghton Mifflin. In order for her story to be taken into serious consideration, she had to submit an outline of it. In this outline McCullers states some of her themes:

This is the theme of man’s revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as is possible. Surrounding this general idea there are several counter themes [. . .] (3) Each man must express himself in his own way - but this is often denied to him by a wasteful, short-sighted society. (4) Human beings are innately cooperative, but an unnatural social tradition makes them behave in ways that are not in accord with their deepest nature. (Illumination 163)

Marx’s effect on McCullers is clear in these few sentences. Society is “wasteful,” “short-sighted,” and “unnatural.” Indeed, for the mill worker to be treated as an appendage of a machine rather than a human being was unnatural to McCullers. Karl Marx explains the dehumanization of the factory worker in Capital:

In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workmen,

who becomes its mere living appendage [. . .] At the same time that factor work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity. The lightening of the labour, even, becomes a sort of torture, since the machine does not free the labourer from work, but deprives the work of all interest. (297)

In this respect industrial society does seem unnatural; production is held in much higher esteem than the well-being of the laborer. He is reduced to the level of appendage of a machine. This reduction makes him less important than the machine itself. If an “appendage” of the machine fails, than another “appendage” can be attached. However, if the machine itself fails, than all “appendages” of that machine are rendered useless. Society is also short-sighted. It cannot see past the immediate present to the future. All of the capitalists’ attention seems to be focused on the here-and-now. The labor power of blacks and whites working together would be immense, and giving in on a few demands (such as shortening the work day) would reap immeasurable benefits for the employers in the future. Unfortunately, the attention of the employers in the textile factory seems to be one of what can be accomplished and how much money they can make today. The workers’ needs are pushed behind those of the employer and the machine.

The setting of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in the mill town is the impetus for much of the hopelessness found in the characters. The name of the town is never mentioned; it could be any city in the industrialized South of the 1930s, but many scholars agree that the basis for the town is McCullers’s hometown of Columbus, Georgia. For example, McCullers describes her hometown as a “depressing image, on

the whole: of a cotton mill, of poor whites and poorer Negroes [. . .] In the poorer section there are tumble-down shacks that need painting and dusty streets that need paving and lights” (qtd. in Evans 18). The fictional mill town in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is described as having streets that “became narrow and unpaved and they were not empty any longer. Groups of dingy, hungry-looking children called to each other and played games. The two-room shacks, each one like the other, were rotten and unpainted. The stink of food and sewage mingled with the dust in the air” (McCullers, Heart 53-4). The corollary between the fictional town and Columbus is evident. McCullers further describes the town and its inhabitants, giving a realistic picture of a Depression era Southern mill town:

The town was in the middle of the deep South. The summers were long and the months of winter cold were very few. Nearly always the sky was a glassy, brilliant azure and the sun burned down riotously bright [. . .] The town was a fairly large one. On the main street there were several blocks of two- and three-story shops and business offices. But the largest buildings in the town were the factories, which employed a large percentage of the population. These cotton mills were big and flourishing and most of the workers in the town were very poor. Often in the faces along the streets there was the desperate look of hunger and of loneliness.

(Heart 5)

Even though the mills were big and business was booming, those who worked in these mills were poor. The owners were the people who were getting rich off of the labor of the poor. The system of capitalism in this mill town is a system that has gone awry. The

setting of the mill town is important in the lives of the characters. The everyday scenes - poverty, sickness, and violence - are not only viewed by the characters but also experienced by them as well (Korenman 8). All the main characters, with the exception of Biff Brannon, live in poverty of varying degrees, Jake Blount and Dr. Copeland have bouts with sickness, and Jake experiences violence first-hand as a participant of physical altercations. Marx would agree with the observation that McCullers makes; the poor all live crowded together in run-down, horrible places. Big business and industrialization has forced them to do so. In Capital Marx states:

“Improvements” of towns, accompanying the increase of wealth, by the demolition of badly built quarters, the erection of palaces for banks, warehouses, etc., the widening of streets for business traffic, for the carriages of luxury, and for the introduction of tramways, etc., drive away the poor into even worse and more crowded hiding places. (674)

Even though Marx was writing about industrialized London, his description fits the picture of the Southern cotton mill town in America. Many industrialized cities had shanty-towns spring up all around the factories. The poor and destitute were often driven to live in these places because of the inexpensive rent. The owners of the factories, the bourgeois, did not have to go near the poverty stricken sections of town; therefore, the conditions of the poor, as well as the poor themselves, were “hidden” from them. The working poor live in poverty because capitalistic society puts them there and does its best to keep them there. As long as they are out of sight, they are out of mind. This isolation in living quarters from other parts of the town “breeds a society of individuals each of whom sees himself at war with society” (Aptheker 38). The characters of Carson

McCullers exhibit this inner conflict. The characters all feel that society has serious flaws that need to be changed, but they are unwilling and unable to put any effort into working together to better their lives. They are wrestling with poverty at the beginning of the book, and all are still in poverty at the end of the book with seemingly no hope of bettering their situations.

In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter the character Jake Blount obviously adheres to Marxist ideology and sees numerous flaws in the capitalistic society. Unfortunately, Blount himself is a member of the proletariat, has no education, and has no way to relay his feelings of oppression and revolution to others. The frustration he feels with the society and the unconcerned workers overwhelms him. Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, an African American, uses the name Karl Marx in the same speech with the name Jesus Christ. Although he understands Marx's theories, he is unsuccessful in helping his people understand their plight. He, too, feels frustration with the ignorance and apathy among the oppressed, specifically the black community. The Kellys are "kept in their place" by capitalistic society. Although they do not start out as bona fide members of the proletariat, the gradual depletion of their finances places them firmly in this class. The materialistic society that they live in has wreaked havoc on all of their lives; Mr. Kelly is unemployed, Mrs. Kelly must take in boarders as income, and the Kelly children, even thirteen-year-old Mick, are forced to get jobs to help with the family finances. The relationship between Columbus and this fictional mill town, including its characters and their respective ideologies and ways of looking at life, is evident; McCullers took what she experienced and saw in the South and transferred it, fictitiously, to paper.

Carson McCullers witnessed the effects of poverty, she saw the withered, deadened expressions of the Southern mill workers, and she was filled with empathy for their plight. The novels that were to follow all of this first-hand observation were written in classic Marxist form, for the objective of Marxist narrative writing is “to deliver the story of the struggles of men and women to free themselves from certain forms of exploitation and oppression” (Eagleton vii). Carson McCullers’s deliverance of the struggles of oppressed men and women, a theme that is prevalent in her writing, was beginning.

CHAPTER TWO

RAGING AGAINST THE MACHINE: JAKE BLOUNT

Jake Blount is one of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter's politically conscious characters. He sees the need for industrial reform in the South. His intentions are honorable; the methods he uses to bring about the change he desires, however, are poorly thought out and unorganized. Jake is filled with rage, an ineffective communicator, uneducated, and an alcoholic. All of these are factors in his inability to organize mill workers into an effective revolutionary force.

Karl Kautsky was a close friend of Frederick Engels and one of the foremost authorities of Marxism in his lifetime. According to him, Jake Blount's hatred is typical of an oppressed laborer in capitalist society. Kautsky says, "The modern working-man does not envy and imitate the rich, as did the poor of pre-capitalist days. He hates them as enemies and despises them as idlers" (171). This statement is true of Jake Blount. He is most definitely a member of the working class, and he does not regress into fits of obsequious fawning when he comes in contact with a member of the bourgeois. Blount's thoughts of capitalistic society are filled with anger, hatred, and malice. He is concerned and angered at how he, a member of the proletariat, as well as other members of the same group, are treated by the bourgeois in a capitalistic society, and he never tries to hide his feelings of disgust from others. Joan Korenman suggests that Jake Blount is a mouthpiece for McCullers. She says, "The length of Jake's remarks, their fundamental soundness, and their agreement with what we see and hear elsewhere in the novel suggest that McCullers is using Jake to communicate her views to the reader" (9). Korenman's

statement is a valid one; this novel was written in the 1930s when anticapitalist criticism was at its peak, and McCullers was familiar with the works of Marx.

As a politically conscious character, Jake Blount carries with him a copy of The Communist Manifesto, trying in vain to free the mill workers from their ignorance and make them understand their plight. Blount's audience, the Southern mill workers, is not a receptive one for many reasons. First, Southern mill workers during the Depression were too depressed and apathetic to be concerned with revolution and rebellion. They could not think of undertaking any type of political activity when their families could barely feed or clothe themselves (Hunt 47). Next, the mill workers had been reduced to nothing short of slaves. Their wills had been broken. All of their working lives they had been made to feel worthless; the machine was the important component of the factory. As Antonio Gramsci explains, "To expect masses who are reduced to such conditions of bodily and spiritual slavery to express their own autonomous historical will; to expect them spontaneously to initiate and sustain a revolutionary action - this is purely an illusion on the part of the ideologues" (189). Also, the workers Blount speaks to are uneducated. The socialist rhetoric that Blount spouts to them is far above their level of comprehension. Immediate action on the part of the workers is impossible:

The toilers do not and cannot all at once [. . .] arrive at a clear and comprehensive understanding of their real position in society or the political course they must follow to end the evils they suffer from and make their way to a better system. Still less can they learn quickly and easily how to act most effectively to protect and promote their class interests. (Cannon 350)

Blount wants the workers to come to an immediate understanding, but their intellectual development prohibits them from doing this.

When Blount speaks to these workers, he speaks to them individually or two at a time. Starting a great proletarian uprising among only two or three mill workers is an impossibility. If Blount truly wants to incite a workers' revolution, then it is imperative that he change his tactics. When using propaganda to sway a person's viewpoint, the "correct tactics [. . .] are not to entice away a few individuals and memberships here and there from one's opponent, but to work on the great mass" (Engels 430). Unfortunately for Blount, he never has the opportunity to speak to an assembled audience of mill workers, and the few individuals he does speak to do not take him seriously.

Another problem in the understanding of the working-class is that Jake Blount himself does not possess the ability to speak coherently to the masses. Biff Brannon's impression of Blount is as follows:

But most of the time nobody was sure just what he was saying. Talk-talk-talk. The words came out of his throat like a cataract [. . .] Sometimes he talked like a linthead and sometimes like a professor. He would use words a foot long and then slip up on his grammar [. . .] There was no connection. Yet connection usually went with brains. This man had a good mind, all right, but he went from one thing to another without any reason behind it at all. He was like a man thrown off his track by something. (McCullers, Heart 15)

It is a frustrating thing to understand and know what one wants to tell others but to not have the ability to do so. Jake is undeterred, however, and continues to do his best to agitate the workers into action:

What I'm trying to tell you is plain and simple. The bastards who own these mills are millionaires. While the doffers and carders and all the people behind the machines who spin and weave the cloth can't hardly make enough to keep their guts quiet. See? So when you walk around the streets and think about it and see hungry, worn-out people and ricket-legged younguns, don't it make you mad? Don't it? (McCullers, Heart 58)

Unfortunately, Jake's tirades fall onto deaf ears, for the mill workers do not take his words seriously. As a matter of fact, they laugh at him, leaving Jake to wander away embarrassed and angry. Later on, in a conversation with Dr. Copeland, Jake makes another diatribe against capitalism. Although his exterior becomes agitated, Jake's statements are lucid, comprehensible attacks on the system of capitalism:

There are corporations worth billions of dollars - and hundreds of thousands of people who don't get to eat [. . .] At least one third of all Southerners live and die no better off than the lowest peasant in any European Fascist state. The average wage of a worker on a tenant farm is only seventy-three dollars per year [. . .] Everywhere there's pellagra and hookworm and anemia. And just plain, pure starvation [. . .] In the village is one huge brick mill and maybe four to five hundred shanties. The houses aren't fit for human beings to live in [. . .] These shanties are

nothing but two or maybe three rooms and a privy - built with far less forethought than barns to house cattle. Built with far less attention to needs than sties for pigs. For under this system pigs are valuable and men are not. You can't make pork chops and sausage out of skinny little mill kids. (McCullers, Heart 255-56)

In capitalist society people lose their value. If workers decided to quit their jobs in protest, there were plenty others who were more than willing to take their places. No thought is given to the condition of their living quarters. Their health and well-being is irrelevant; as long as they can do their job, nothing else matters.

This speech of Jake's, eloquent as it is, is disregarded by Dr. Copeland, the person to whom it is directed. Dr. Copeland does not fully listen to Blount; he is concerned with the plight of the African American, a group Jake has left out of his speech. This failure of communication, failure to come together for the common good, leaves the individual in a state of alienation. Jake Blount's frustration and failure to communicate manifests itself in the abuse of alcohol. Throughout the course of the novel Blount drinks to ebb his frustration with the current state of affairs in society. Blount is introduced in the novel as a "short, squat man in overalls who had become drunk and boisterous" (McCullers, Heart 12). Many times in the novel Jake Blount is referred to simply as "the drunk." Biff Brannon is amazed at the vehemence of Blount's drinking, thinking that never "had he seen a fellow drink so much, stay drunk so long" (McCullers, Heart 14). Working-class people often turn to alcohol to help them cope. Drinking is much easier than trying to figure out a way to change society. Georg Lukacs explains that the man "who can cure his disgust with the world only in intoxication, seeks, like the morphine

addict, to find a way out by heightening the intensity of the intoxicant rather than by a way of life that has no need of intoxication” (“Existentialism” 252). Blount is overwhelmed by the circumstances in the United States. “The loneliness in him was so keen that he was filled with terror” (McCullers, Heart 131). Instead of finding a way to better his situation, Blount resorts to drinking bootleg liquor to assuage his terror, finding warmth and relaxation in the intoxicant (McCullers, Heart 131). Jake Blount, because of his many failures to communicate what he believes to be an extremely important message, considers alcohol his only recourse.

When Jake Blount accompanies Singer to Dr. Copeland’s house, he is surrounded by people who share his enthusiasm for change and have the same beliefs. Even so, Blount cannot communicate with them. The roles are reversed this time, however; it is Blount who cannot understand what is being explained to him. Dr. Copeland is one of the few educated black men in the town; two others are Marshall Nicolls and John Roberts. These two, Nicolls and Roberts, are the men Blount sits between. Blount, a man who likes to show off his vocabulary without actually knowing what the words he uses mean, is now trying to understand Nicolls, a pharmacist who knows precisely what the words he uses mean. Nicolls tries to make Blount see that they are fighting for the same cause and need to build the relationship between races rather than spend time tearing them down:

It is important not to impair these amicable relations but to promote them in all ways earnestly possible. We members of the colored race must strive in all ways to uplift our citizens. The Doctor in yonder has strived in every way. But sometimes it has seemed to me like he had not

recognized fully enough certain elements of the different races and the situation. (McCullers, Heart 252)

Blount, drinking again to alleviate his tension and frustration, replies irritably, “Christ’ sake, man, speak out plain, because I can’t understand a thing you say” (McCullers, Heart 252). Once again two classes of people who share the same goals come to an impasse in communication. Nicolls and Roberts have a genuine interest in uniting with Blount to advocate change, but Blount, a proud man, feels that they are laughing at him and staggers away from the conversation (McCullers, Heart 253). There is nothing he can do but stagger away. Capitalism breeds people who cannot communicate; they suffer from alienation on every level. Nicolls and Roberts will continue to discuss change, but only to each other; no change will come about.

Open communication is a necessity in bringing about revolutionary change. All parties involved must understand each other and know what they are fighting for. Jake Blount understands the need for change; however, he is unable to express the ideas he has to mill workers in the town. Alcoholism has much to do with this inability to communicate; it is a recreational evil of the working class that serves to blunt their consciousness for a short time. Jake’s last name, Blount, serves as a reminder to the reader of the effect of alcohol on the mind. Blount’s use of alcohol will certainly be a hindrance to any type of education he may receive in forming labor unions; drunkenness is not conducive to any type of learning environment. As for Blount being a mouthpiece for McCullers, this is probably both true and untrue. McCullers would have agreed with his message; however, she would also realize that alcoholism would only be a hindrance. Her father and her husband were alcoholics, and McCullers knew the destructive force of

alcohol. She would have admired Blount's grit and determination, his stubbornness, his willingness to continue to carry Marx's message to the mill workers. Unfortunately, though, the workers will not understand Jake Blount any more than he understands Nicolls and Roberts. The outlook for social change is a bleak one.

CHAPTER THREE

PLAYING THE RACE CARD: DR. BENEDICT MADY COPELAND

Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, a black physician, is another socially conscious character present in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter. Dr. Copeland resembles Jake Blount in many respects. They both see problems in the world that are in need of immediate change, they both believe in Marxism, they both share an intense desire to awaken the social consciousness of others, they both criticize the capitalist system, and, sadly, they both have insurmountable trouble in communicating their ideas to others.

Jake Blount's Marxism was due to his working-class status; Dr. Copeland's Marxism is a result of different circumstances. Dr. Copeland has an intense concern for the oppression, both economic and political, of Southern blacks; as a black man he has experienced this oppression, but of larger consequence to him is seeing how the oppression has affected his patients (Korenman 9). Dr. Copeland's life's passion is to make life better for his people. He has an immense love for them, as shown in his annual Christmas party for the black community. Volunteers contribute what they can, and all who attend are given a gift. The gift given, however, is based on one of Karl Marx's "commandments" - "From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs" (qtd. in McCullers, Heart 166).

Dr. Copeland is an educated man; by listening to his speeches one can tell he is a student of Marxism and believes in it wholeheartedly. He patiently explains how one class is exploited by another. Dr. Copeland uses the analogy of building a house to explain to the assembled mass. He says, "So when a man buys this brick house he is

paying for the labor that went to make it. But who gets the money - the profit? Not the many men who did the work - but the bosses who control them” (McCullers, Heart 162). This statement shows that Dr. Copeland has a fine understanding of Marx’s theory of surplus value. It is the capitalist, the boss, who has become rich from the labor of others. The laborers are paid a menial wage for their labor, and the boss reaps the profits. Profits from the purchase of the house are never shared with the laborers. By using Dr. Copeland to describe Marx’s theory of surplus value with so much clarity and understanding, it is easy to believe that McCullers herself had thoroughly read Marx and had an understanding of his message.

Dr. Copeland does not stop with the explanation of surplus value; he goes on in his speech to explain other theories of Marx’s as well. He explains Marx’s idea of the communal sharing of resources using a mule as an example:

Say a man died and left his mule to his four sons. The sons would not wish to cut up the mule into four parts and each take his share. They would own and work the mule together. That is the way Marx says all of the natural resources should be owned - not by one group of rich people but by all of the workers of the world as a whole. (McCullers, Heart 163)

It is common knowledge among social historians that Marx viewed labor as a commodity, a thing owned by the poor that they could sell in order to live. For many oppressed people in the Thirties their labor was the only thing they did possess. Dr. Copeland explains labor as a commodity as well to the Christmas party guests:

All that we own is our bodies. And we sell our bodies every day we live. We sell them when we go out in the morning to our jobs and when we

labor all the day. We are forced to sell at any price, at any time, for any purpose. We are forced to sell our bodies so that we can eat and live. And the price which is given us for this is only enough so that we will have the strength to labor longer for the profits of others. (McCullers, Heart 163)

The poor, both black and white, have nothing to bargain with; they own none of the means of production. All they possess is their own labor power. Just as a prostitute sells her body and the “pimp” reaps the profits, so the laborers sell their labor power and the capitalists reap the profits. This selling of oneself is a different kind of prostitution, though; it is a necessary prostitution rather than a chosen one.

What Dr. Copeland is explaining to his guests is Marx’s theory of alienation of labor. The people are not choosing their jobs; they are forced into them out of economic necessity. Therefore, they take no satisfaction in their jobs. Marx’s definition of alienation of labor is:

In his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind [. . .] He is at home when he is not working, and when he is working he is not at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it [. . .] Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else’s, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another (Manuscripts 60)

The workers do not own their labor; they are alienated from it because labor, as a commodity, belongs to the capitalist who bought it. Even though Dr. Copeland is referring to the African American class, this explanation is also true for the poor white mill worker.

Dr. Copeland, like Jake Blount, believes that people should not have to live their lives in ignorance. The two men talk of society's problems when Blount visits Dr. Copeland after hearing about the amputation of the legs of the doctor's son Willie. Jake Blount and Dr. Copeland come to an agreement about people needing to know the truth. Blount begins the dialogue by saying, "The only solution is for the people to know. Once they know the truth they can be oppressed no longer" (McCullers, Heart 258). Dr. Copeland is in perfect agreement with Blount; he responds, "Yes, once they understand the workings of this society" (McCullers, Heart 258). In reaching this agreement the two men take the first step toward achieving an end to oppression. The fact that they are from two seemingly different classes, the Negro and the poor white, makes their agreement much more astonishing. It is this action between black masses and white workers that is imperative for a successful long-term effort to abolish capitalism in America (Breitman 215). This agreement is short-lived, however, and the two men fall into an argument on the ways to enlighten the people. Jake Blount's method of showing people the truth includes pulling Willie across the country in a cart and writing chain letters, and Dr. Copeland wants to wage a nonviolent demonstration and march on Washington (McCullers, Heart 258-59). Each one denigrates the other's ideas. After hearing Blount's ideas Dr. Copeland responds, "Do not be childish. You cannot just go about talking. Chain letters indeed! Knows and don't-knows" (McCullers, Heart 258).

Blount, suffering the sting of humiliation, responds in similar fashion to the doctor's ideas and says, "What good will it do if you get them to demonstrate against a thing if they don't know? You're trying to stuff the hog by way of his ass" (McCullers, Heart 259).

Failure to communicate is a phenomenon of capitalist society; the oppressed classes have been alienated in so many ways for so long that they have lost the ability to relate to each other. Communication failure can be traced back to alienation of labor. When workers are estranged and alienated from their labor, their mental faculties are held in check; therefore, their communication skills are lost, and they are alienated from other people in society. Marx describes the estrangement of person from person as "an immediate consequence of the fact that man is estranged from the product of his labour" (Manuscripts 63). So, instead of listening and working together to defeat a common enemy, capitalism, Blount and Dr. Copeland are caught up in petty differences of opinion. From this point on the conversation deteriorates even more; Blount and Dr. Copeland do not understand each other, bringing a conversation that was ripe with promise in the beginning to an unfortunate end. Blount storms out of Dr. Copeland's house, calling him a "short-sighted bigot," and Dr. Copeland, in return, addresses Blount as a "white fiend" (McCullers, Heart 262). Two critics have described this communication failure between Dr. Copeland and Jake Blount, saying the end result is isolation. Joan Korenman explains, "Jake and Dr. Copeland [. . .] fail to understand each other. Their meeting serves merely as further illustration of what we see elsewhere in the novel - the inability of man to communicate, the isolation of each individual from his fellow man" (13). Oliver Evans echoes this statement when he says, "Individuals are

prevented from uniting for a useful purpose by [. . .] petty differences which divide them and weaken their force, driving them deeper than ever into the isolation which is the result of their failure to achieve harmonious social union” (51). Indeed, the difference of opinion on the method of the message is petty and divisive. Instead of communicating and overcoming their isolation from others, Dr. Copeland and Jake insult each other and continue to sink deeper into the pit of isolation that capitalist society provides.

Isolation, though, is only one hateful facet of capitalistic society; racism is another. Racism is an evil of capitalist society; it keeps classes such as the poor whites and African Americans from uniting together on a single front. “Capitalism needs racism; without it the white worker could see the situation of the black worker in terms of the super exploitation of his class brother, and thus ally with him to their mutual benefit” (Stratman 106). The bourgeois is benefited by racism; it keeps the two warring classes focused on each other rather than uniting against the ruling class. Dr. Copeland has experienced racism his entire life. He has been called demoralizing names such as “boy” and “uncle” (McCullers, Heart 74), but he had never experienced racism personally in its most violent form until after Willie’s leg amputation.

Dr. Copeland wanted to speak to the judge about Willie. After being told the judge was not in and tolerating a deputy’s insolent tone, the doctor is determined to wait out the deputy and see the judge. After sitting and waiting for over thirty minutes, he is called by the deputy and is accused of being drunk. Dr. Copeland speaks four words that are totally unacceptable to say to a white man. He says, “That is a lie” (McCullers, Heart 224). These four words provoked the deputy to strike the doctor; he was beaten badly and taken to jail for being a “damn biggity nigger” (McCullers, Heart 224).

It is of little surprise that Dr. Copeland held such reverence for Karl Marx, for in the decade of the Thirties the Communists extended their influence as much as they could in the equal rights struggle for African Americans (Browder 224). Carson McCullers herself traces her belief in the Communist party back to witnessing racism in the South as a child. She recalls seeing black people going through garbage cans, and remembers “people, kind, sweet people who had nursed us so tenderly, humiliated because of their color. I do not wonder now, as my father used to wonder, why I was a great believer of the Communist party” (Illumination 56). The Communist party sought abolition of all kinds of exploitation:

The party struggles, not for any class privileges, but for the abolition of classes and class-rule [. . .] In conformity with these principles it opposes [. . .] not only the exploitation and oppression of wage-workers, but also every form of exploitation and oppression, be it directed against a class, a party, a sex, or a race. (Kautsky 160)

With a mission statement such as this, it is understandable why membership in the Communist party was attractive to educated members of the African American community. When Dr. Copeland speaks of Marx, he uses terms that could be taken to be religious. He describes of Marx’s “mission,” calls him a “wise man,” and speaks of his “commandments” (McCullers, Heart 161-66). Dr. Copeland speaks of Marx in an evangelical tone:

There are many of our people who hate the poor of the white race, and they hate us. The people in this town living by the river who work in the mills. People who are almost as much in need as we are ourselves. This

hatred is a great evil, and no good can ever come from it. We must remember the words of Karl Marx and see the truth according to his teachings [. . .] These main truths from Karl Marx we must keep in our hearts always and not forget. (McCullers, Heart 163)

The “sermon” delivered by Dr. Copeland would make just as much sense if the word “Jesus” was put in place of “Karl Marx.” While most of the black community embraced Christ and his teachings, Dr. Copeland was exhorting the people he loved to embrace the words of Karl Marx.

The people in as much need as the African Americans, the poor whites mentioned by Dr. Copeland, hate the black community. When placed in a backdrop of capitalist society, it is imperative for the poor whites to hate the black community; by hating a group “beneath” them, they are giving value to their otherwise valueless lives. The poor whites of the South of the Thirties owned no property; the only thing they had of value to sell was their labor. They experienced almost as much social inequality as the black community (Dollard 76). The white mill workers were alienated from their labor, their fellow workers, and themselves. The division of labor had increased so dramatically by this time that the workers felt as if they had become “worthless, transformed into a simple, monotonous productive force that does not have to use intense bodily or intellectual faculties” (Marx, “Wage Labour” 188). For many of the Southern poor whites, the only thing they could find any kind of pride in at all was the fact that they were white and that there was another class lower than they were on the social scale (McCullers, “Dream” 281). The work of the laborers makes them feel inadequate as human beings; the prestige of being white, however, boosts their self-esteem and gives

them “an expansive feeling of being something special and valuable” (Dollard 173-74). They take this feeling of value to extremes at times, though, and violence erupts. McCullers provides the reader with a description of this violence when “a family of Negroes moved into the end house on one of the most dismal streets, and this caused so much indignation that the house was burned and the black man beaten by his neighbors” (Heart 170). Any African American family that moved into a white neighborhood in the Thirties, no matter how dilapidated the neighborhood was, knew that there would be repercussions for their actions. The reason a family would subject itself to this type of violence is easily explained, however. “Living beside someone is a stronger statement of social equality than work space or worship space” (Botsch 142).

Racism was a definite social evil of the time period, but it did not stand independent from other capitalist society horrors. Racism, from a Marxist point of view, is interrelated to both isolation and the dangers of capitalism (Call 5). Isolation is a central theme in Marxist writing; racism certainly isolates one class of people from another. The labor of the African American class has a long history of being exploited, going all the way back to the era of slavery. The exploitation of their labor puts them in the proletariat with the white laborers. Both the black worker and the poor white worker find themselves trapped in capitalism with seemingly no hope of escape. Their economic status is practically identical even though their skin color is not. Racism transcends the stratum of being only a social issue and becomes an economic issue as well.

CHAPTER FOUR

KEEPING IT IN THE FAMILY: THE KELLYS

The Kelly family is the best example of the oppression that takes place in a capitalist society. Not just one person of the family is affected; all members of the Kelly family, with the possible exception of Ralph who is only seventeen months old, feel the tightened noose of capitalism around their necks. Mick's father is listless, aimless, and feels worthless. His small business is gradually being destroyed by larger stores in town, driving him into the ranks of the proletariat. Mrs. Kelly crowds her three daughters into one small room so that the family can have more room for boarders, their primary source of income. Times are hard, though, and more often than not the boarders cannot pay the rent. Four of the Kelly children, all teenagers, must give up their childhoods and find jobs to help the family finances. All of this economic deprivation is shown to the readers through the eyes of Mick Kelly.

Mick Kelly is Carson McCuller's youngest protagonist in the novel. She is a thirteen-year-old tomboy who is too young to relate to her older sisters and too old to relate to her younger brothers (McCuller, Heart 16). Thus, before the readers know anything else about her, they can surmise that she is alienated within her own family. Nevertheless, Mick is full of youthful exuberance and idealism; she has big dreams and plans for herself:

M.K. - That was what she would have written on everything when she was seventeen years old and very famous [. . .] She would invent little tiny radios the size of a green pea that people could carry around and stick in

their ears. Also flying machines people could fasten on their backs like knapsacks and go zipping all over the world. After that she would be the first one to make a large tunnel through the world to China, and people could go down in big balloons. Those were the first things she would invent. They were already planned. (McCullers, Heart 30-31)

To accomplish all of this in only four years seems to be impossible and absolutely absurd, but to Mick these dreams are things that could really happen. She is determined to better her life. Being an inventor is not Mick's only dream; she also intends to be a composer. Mick dreams, "Later on - when she was twenty - she would be a great world-famous composer. She would have a whole symphony orchestra and conduct all of her music herself" (McCullers, Heart 206). Grandiose dreams, goals, and plans are typical of practically all young people. Mick Kelly, however, seems "to have a necessity to compensate, in dreams and illusions, for the imperfections and dissatisfactions of the real world" (Evans 123). The dream world she imagines, with its luxury, fame, and riches, is a far better place than the real world she lives in, which includes despair, poverty, and dejection. This explains why Mick is so fascinated with music; the classical music she loves is an escape mechanism from the destitution that surrounds her. She seeks music especially when reality is too much for her small shoulders to bear. After a fight with her brother she sits on the steps waiting for a boarder to turn on the radio (McCullers, Heart 45), and after the fiasco of her party she listens to Beethoven under the windowsill of an unsuspecting couple (McCullers, Heart 101). At this point in her life Mick does not realize that the capitalistic society that she lives in will keep her oppressed. The system that constrains her will continue to do so. Her dreams of fame and fortune will remain

only dreams; the freedom and independence from despair that she so desperately seeks will remain out of her reach. The strangling forces of social factors on the individual “makes it all but impossible to allow him his own independence and latitude. From the start he is doomed to a losing battle” (Gurko 64). The social factors imposed on Mick and her entire family by the materialistic society they live in have destined them to fail.

Mick’s family is not a part of the “factory folk”; they do not live in the slums or shacks in the shadow of the mill. Mick’s part of town actually mirrors that of Carson McCullers’s part of town in her childhood home of Columbus, Georgia. Mick’s family lives in a part of town that is not where the bourgeois live but not where the poorest of the poor live, either. The home of the Kellys, however, is becoming run-down quickly. The Kelly house is “narrow and had not been painted for many years. It did not seem to be built strong enough for its three stories of height. It sagged on one side” (McCullers, Heart 35). The deterioration of the outside of the Kelly house at the beginning of the novel symbolizes the deterioration of the finances of the Kelly family during the course of the novel.

Mick’s father’s deterioration is already taking place at the beginning of the story. He had once been a carpenter but broke his hip in a fall and was now afraid of heights. From the outset of the novel the reader sees Mr. Kelly as almost obsessed with money. “That was one thing her Dad could never get off his mind - ways he could have made money and didn’t” (McCullers, Heart 41). During this period in history men were supposed to be the breadwinners and provide for the family; Mick’s father does not fit this role. He fixes clocks and watches occasionally, but the money he earns is minimal at best. He is an independent jeweler; he is not employed by a jewelry store in town. Mr.

Kelly works from his home and is being financially squashed by a capitalistic society that encourages competition. At the beginning of the novel, he and his family are in the very lowest part of the middle class, but they gradually fall further into the ranks of the lower class. Karl Marx explains how this happens among small craftsmen:

The lower strata of the middle class - the small trades people, shopkeepers, and retired tradesmen generally, the handicraftsmen and peasants - all these sink gradually into the proletariat, partly because their diminutive capital does not suffice for the scale on which Modern Industry is carried on, and is swamped in the competition with the huge capitalists, partly because their specialized skill is rendered worthless by new methods of production. (Manifesto 341-42)

Jewelry stores in town have better equipment and can replace old, broken parts with new ones rather than trying to fix them as Mr. Kelly does. It is inconceivable to think that Mr. Kelly will ever be able to compete with the larger stores. This competition is pushing him and his family toward poverty. The unemployment that Mr. Kelly faces each day has taken a toll on him. He feels cut off from and useless to his family (McCullers, Heart 86), and he hides what little money he has from everyone else. Mick notices this and says, "This summer he had gotten like a kid about hiding those nickels and dimes he kept for himself. Sometimes he hid them in his shoes, and other times in a little slit he had cut in his belt" (McCullers, Heart 85). In a capitalist society money reaches a level of importance that supersedes everything else; hence, Mr. Kelly wants to keep it for himself. Capitalist society has broken Mr. Kelly.

Because of Mr. Kelly's unemployment, other members of the family have to find jobs to help with the income. Mrs. Kelly takes in boarders, which was a common practice in the Thirties. "Frequently the wife improved finances at the cost of her own energy by such means as [. . .] accommodating boarders or tourists" (Wecter 26). Mrs. Kelly is rarely heard from in the novel; she always seems busy cooking, cleaning, or moving something for a boarder. It seems as if she has very little time to interact with her children. Mrs. Kelly is faced with an unfortunate dilemma. She can continue to expend her energy working to the detriment of her family, or she can stop working and decrease the family's capital. In capitalist society this is a no-win situation. If the lady of the house chooses work, then her children are not given much attention; the work leaves her too tired to have positive interaction with them. If she chooses the children and does not work, the family could quite possibly fall so far into debt that there would be no way out. Capitalism necessitates choosing one of these options; deciding to choose both is not feasible.

Mrs. Kelly employs a domestic, Dr. Copeland's daughter, Portia, but this is by no means an indication of her family's capital. As a matter of fact, she barely has enough money to pay Portia, and "sometimes," Portia says, "Mrs. Kelly lacks a dollar or fifty cents of paying me the full amount" (McCullers, Heart 72). Mrs. Kelly and Portia have similar financial difficulties, yet Mrs. Kelly keeps Portia as an employee. Many domestics in the South were employed by working class women who shared the same financial distress (Kousha 78). Three of the six Kelly children have jobs - Bill, Hazel, and Etta. It was not uncommon in the early 1900s for children to have jobs and work ten to twelve hours a day (Werstein 60). In essence, the Kelly children have become

boarders; they give half of their weekly earnings to the family for “their keep” (McCullers, Heart 204). Four members of the Kelly family are providing income, yet it is still not enough to keep the family from dropping into poverty.

The crushing blow to the Kelly finances comes when Bubber, Mick’s younger brother, accidentally shoots Baby Wilson, a four-year old neighbor, in the head with a BB gun. Mrs. Wilson demands the best that money can buy and then some for her daughter during her convalescence:

The things you got to pay are just the actual price of what it will cost us in money. There’s Baby’s private room in the hospital and a private nurse until she can come home. There’s the operating room and the doctor’s bill and for once I intend the doctor to be paid right away. Also, they shaved all Baby’s hair off and you got to pay me for the permanent wave I took her to Atlanta to get - so when her hair grows back natural she can have another one. And there’s the price of her costume and other little extra bills like that. (McCullers, Heart 149)

Mrs. Wilson has had no other contact with the Kellys before this unfortunate accident, for in a society dominated by capitalism “individuals become so separated and isolated that they establish contact only when they can use each other as means to particular ends” (Pappenheim 81). People who have lived in a capitalist society all of their lives do not know how to make human contacts unless they are using other people for their own advantage. This is the case with Mrs. Wilson; she sees in the Kellys an opportunity to accrue money, and she takes it knowing that the Kellys have no money and nothing of value to give her in place of money. The strain that the Baby Wilson situation puts on

the Kelly family is an oppressive one. Their bills keep coming in, and even Mick sees no way out of the debt that they are drowning in:

She never even had a nickel to herself any more. They were that poor. Money was the main thing. All the time it was money, money, oney. They had to pay through the nose for Baby Wilson's private room and private nurse. But even that was just one bill. By the time one thing was paid for something else always would crop up. They owed around two hundred dollars that had to be paid right away. They lost the house. Their Dad got a hundred dollars out of the deal and let the bank take over the mortgage. Then he borrowed another fifty dollars and Mister Singer went on the note with him. Afterward they had to worry about rent every month instead of taxes. They were mighty near as poor as factory folks. (McCullers, Heart 204)

Just when the Kellys seem to reach their financial nadir, they receive another blow to the income; Etta becomes sick and loses her job.

Etta's income was helping the family even if they were still only slightly above poverty. When she loses her job because of her illness, the problem is twofold; one source of income for the family is gone, and another doctor's bill arrives. Etta's ovary is so diseased that the doctor suggests immediate surgery, but Mr. Kelly says they have to wait; they have no money (McCullers, Heart 227). Poor whites in the South often lived with severe sickness and disease without receiving medical attention. The money just was not there to go to a doctor. As stated previously, money is of utmost importance in a capitalistic society; if people do not have it, then they receive no services, including

medical services. The Kellys are good people; they certainly have done nothing to deserve such a financial hardship. Unfortunately, capitalism sees no difference between good and bad; the difference is between the haves and the have-nots. The Kellys are most definitely members of the have-not group. Etta's sickness, coupled with the extravagant bills for Baby Wilson's recovery, places the family under virtually unrecoverable financial stress. Mick once again feels the sting of poverty in a capitalist society. She says, "It was money, money, money all the time. They owed to the grocery and they owed the last payment on some furniture. And now since they had lost the house they owed money there too" (McCullers, Heart 264). When Hazel tells Mick about a job opening at Woolworth's, Mick decides to take it. Youthful, idealistic Mick falls into the capitalist trap of alienated labor.

Mick's decision to take the job is the beginning of adulthood for her and the end of youthful dreams. The hour after she announces she will take the job, she experiences a somewhat negative epiphany:

The excitement of the hour before had died down and she was sick to the stomach. She was going to work in the ten-cent store and she did not want to work there. It was like she had been trapped into something. The job wouldn't be just for the summer - but for a long time, as long a time as she could see ahead. Once they were used to the money coming in it would be impossible to do without again. That was the way things were

(McCullers, Heart 273)

Mick now feels the full force of oppression under capitalism. She knew she would not go back to school, and all of her dreams would have to be put on hold. Dreams are of no

importance in a materialistic society; money is all that matters, and society was telling Mick to “earn her keep” (McCullers, Heart 273). Mick’s disillusionment with her work manifests itself in frustration and unanswered questions. After a particularly long day at work, just getting off at seven o’clock in the evening, one question bothers Mick. She wants to know, “What good was it? That was the question she would like to know. What the hell good it was. All the plans she had made, and the music. When all that came of it was this trap - the store, then home to sleep, and back at the store again” (McCullers, Heart 299). Mick is learning what many other laborers have known for a long time; life under capitalism is no good at all. The entrapment Mick feels is not her own fault; she is part of a society that crushes dreams, that takes no thought of the welfare of human beings. Capitalist society takes the innocence and idealism away from Mick. She is a thirteen year-old girl who works twelve-hour days and can see no way out. She is trapped in the cycle of capitalism.

Even though she does not work in a mill, Mick suffers the same alienation of labor that factory workers experience. “The alienation of labor means that work provides no satisfaction and fulfillment but is only a source of physical exhaustion and mental debasement [. . .] It constitutes merely a means of livelihood, a means of earning the wage sufficient to keeping the worker alive” (Jordan 17-18). When workers are alienated from their labor, their minds suffer as well as their bodies. Mick’s physical and mental faculties are spent at the end of the day:

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 quick little tune would come and go - but she never went into the inside room with music

like she used to do. It was like she was too tense. Or maybe because it was like the store took all her energy and time. Woolworth'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. But now she was always too tired. At home she just ate supper and slept and then ate breakfast and went off to the store again. (McCullers, Heart 301)

Mick is now engulfed in the rut that capitalism provides. All she has time for is eating, sleeping, and working. Karl Marx, describing the results of the absence of leisure time on the laborer, says, "A man who has no free time to dispose of, whose whole lifetime, apart from the mere physical interruptions of sleep, meals, and so forth, is absorbed by his labour for the capitalist [. . .] broken in body and brutalised in mind" ("Wages, Price" 68-69). Although she is not a man and not a factory worker, Mick's mind as well as her body has suffered from monotonous, menial labor. Music, Mick's escape from reality, had lost its significance. The work in the store exhausts and degrades Mick's mind; she cannot even concentrate on music, a thing that had never failed to be an escape for her. Music no longer works as an escape from reality because the reality that Mick is now trapped in has no escape. The alienation of labor that she feels has caused her to be as much of a machine as the register she operates at Woolworth's. She works, goes home, sleeps, and then repeats the entire process all over again, robotically. Life, like work, becomes monotonous. Mick's "ultimate isolation is as certain as the new day's oppressive sunshine" (Presley 106). Capitalism has stripped the optimism from her.

Capitalism has all but decimated the Kelly family. Economic ruin is no respecter of persons. McCullers shows the reader the effects of capitalism on a "good" family.

McCullers's disillusion with capitalism was not unique to her; this disillusionment was widespread among others because of the many crises and great wars (Aptheker 46). The financial ruin that is beginning for the Kelly family was happening to many families, in both the North and the South, in the decade of the Thirties. The picture of the Kelly family that McCullers presents to the reader is a real one. Capitalism was forcing many real families into a pit of despair. The Kellys serve as an example of how ruthless capitalist society is.

CHAPTER FIVE

LIKE OIL AND WATER: RELIGION AND JOHN SINGER

Speaking of religion, Karl Marx says, “Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the sentiment of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people” (“Contribution” 12). Religion is just another way to keep the proletariat in its place. It promises great rewards in heaven to replace suffering on earth. Karl Marx speaks vehemently of Christianity:

The social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling and an oppressed class, and for the latter they have only the pious wish that the former will be benevolent [. . .] The social principles of Christianity declare all vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed to be either just punishment for original sin and other sins, or suffering that the Lord in his infinite wisdom has destined for those redeemed [. . .] The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submission, humility [. . .] and the proletariat [. . .] needs its courage, its self-respect, its pride, and its sense of independence even more than its bread [. . .] So much for the social principles of Christianity. (“Social Principles” 94)

Religion has no place in a revolutionary movement; it kills the spirit of the oppressed class by promising them treasures in heaven.

Many factory workers and poor whites in the South considered themselves religious and “preferred the way of the church, which encouraged operatives to lead

orderly, hard-working lives” (Hall 124). The church’s motives were not always altruistic, however; many of the ministers were on the factory employer’s payroll, and they preached a gospel that would be “acceptable in the main to a capitalistic employer - a gospel of work, of gratitude for present blessings, and of patience with economic and social maladjustment as temporal and outside the sphere of religious concern“ (Hall 124). From a Marxist point of view, these are precisely the problems with organized religion. Ministers preach whatever the bourgeois wants them to preach, the oppressed are told that “idle hands are the devil’s workshop,” and the poorest of the poor are told to be thankful for their blessings when they have no blessings at all. Religion truly does become an opium, another escape from the reality that serves to dull the senses of and oppress the proletariat.

Speaking of the Christian church, Karl Marx says, “What counts, indeed, is alienation, but not man. The only man who does count [. . .] is a being who is specifically differentiated from other men” (“Question” 179). Marx is speaking of Christ in this passage, but religion in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter has to do with the “divine being” of John Singer. Marx’s quote does apply to Singer, however. For Jake Blount, Mick Kelly, and Dr. Copeland, Singer is the only person who does really count for anything. Singer is also specifically different from other men; he is mute. Jake Blount, Dr. Copeland, and Mick Kelly do not believe in organized religion, and the capitalist system that oppresses them affords them little else to believe in. Thus, when John Singer comes to town, these characters choose to make him their “God.” The characters see in Singer what they want to see and put all of themselves into John Singer; they follow him, they emulate him, they visit him, and they talk to him. He becomes their focus, the

person into whom they put all of their hope for a better life. The problem with this, though, is they each lose sight of themselves and become alienated from themselves. Marx says, “The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself” (Manuscripts 58). Blount, Mick, and Dr. Copeland put all of their hopes, wishes, and dreams into John Singer. In doing this they leave nothing in themselves. Thus, when John Singer dies, the characters are devastated, confused, and lonelier than they were before they met Singer.

John Singer has an other-worldly quality about him. People are naturally drawn to him. “The fellow was downright uncanny. People felt themselves watching him even before they knew that there was anything different about him. His eyes made a person think that he heard things nobody else had ever heard, that he knew things no one had ever guessed before. He did not seem quite human” (McCullers, Heart 22). People who met Singer felt that they had something in common with him:

The Jews said that he was a Jew. The merchants along the main street claimed he had received a large legacy and was a very rich man. It was whispered in one browbeaten textile union that the mute was an organizer for the C.I.O. A lone Turk who had roamed into the town years ago and who languished with his family behind the little store where they sold linens claimed passionately to his wife that the mute was Turkish [. . .] One old man from the country said that the mute had come from somewhere near his home and that the mute’s father had the finest tobacco crop in all the country. (McCullers, Heart 171)

Singer, like Jesus, is all things to all people. Blount, Dr. Copeland, and Mick Kelly feel that Singer will always understand whatever they tell him; therefore, each one of them

make frequent trips to Singer's room at the Kelly house. Singer is not God incarnate, of course, but his three frequent visitors mold him into their own kind of god; furthermore, Singer displays many "Christian" traits. He gives money to the poor, he buys a radio for his guests to enjoy, he takes in a homeless Jake Blount, and he is polite to all (Rich 111). When Blount, Dr. Copeland, and Mick put their energy into talking to and thinking about Singer, however, they become alienated from themselves. As stated before, Singer is not God, but he is a god to Blount, Dr. Copeland, and Mick Kelly; believing in any god can lead to nothing but alienation. Gods are beings who are different from men and are personally religious; men will never achieve the level of religion that gods have achieved (Marx, "Question" 179). The three characters will never achieve the level of understanding that each one believes John Singer to have, but they strive to gain that understanding by focusing all of their energy into him. Singer becomes their religion.

Jake Blount's first impression of Singer is that Singer is one of the few who know the truth. No one else has ever understood his Marxist ramblings, but he believes that Singer can. "You're the only one in this town who catches what I mean [. . .] For two days now I been talking to you in my mind because I know you understand the things I want to mean" (McCullers, Heart 21). Singer always listens patiently, something that Blount has not often experienced when speaking to others, and Blount becomes a frequent visitor to Singer's room. Singer has the ability to calm the riotous drunk. Blount seems to fall into a trance just from looking into Singer's eyes. "He stared at them so long that he almost hypnotized himself. He lost the urge to be riotous and felt calm again. The eyes seemed to understand all that he had meant to say and to hold some message for him" (McCullers, Heart 60-61). Just as the apostles wanted to follow Jesus

everywhere, Blount wants to follow Singer so that he can figure out the message that Singer has just for him. He calls Singer “the only one” (McCullers, Heart 130). When Jake feels himself drowning in a sea of troubles, it is Singer’s face he looks for, and it is Singer’s face that brings him peace when he finds it. Singer has become a Christ-figure for Jake Blount. He seeks out Singer to relieve his troubles and believes that Singer is the only one who can help him.

Dr. Copeland also has a “religious” attraction to Singer. Like Blount, Dr. Copeland finds peace with Singer. “In the middle of the morning he went to Singer’s room. The visit blunted the feeling of loneliness in him so that when he said good-bye he was at peace with himself once more” (McCullers, Heart 127). Dr. Copeland fervently believed that Singer knew what it was like to be a member of an oppressed class. He also believes, like Jake, that Singer is blessed with the gift of true knowledge. “He was a truly good man. He was a white man of intellect and true knowledge. In him there was none of the mean insolence” (McCullers, Heart 167). To Dr. Copeland, Singer is the exception to the white race. John Singer is sensitive to the plight of the black community; in him is the hope for the future of the white race.

Mick Kelly thinks of Singer whenever she thinks about what God is supposed to look like. She even prays to Singer, saying, “Lord forgiveth me, for I knoweth not what I do” (McCullers, Heart 102). Singer has become Mick’s reason for living. Her devotion for him becomes an obsession; she wants to be with him all the time:

Every afternoon as soon as she finished playing on the piano in the gym she walked down the main street past the store where he worked. From the front window she couldn’t see Mister Singer. He worked in the back,

behind a curtain. But she looked at the store where he stayed every day and saw the people he knew. Then every night she waited on the front porch for him to come home. Sometimes she followed him upstairs. She sat on the bed and watched him put away his hat and undo the button on his collar and brush his hair. For some reason it was like they had a secret together. (McCullers, Heart 207)

Christians try their best their entire lives to emulate Christ's life; Mick wants to emulate Singer:

He kept his toothbrush and toothpaste in a glass on his table. So instead of leaving her toothbrush on the bathroom shelf she kept it in a glass, also. He didn't like cabbage [. . .] Now she couldn't eat cabbage either. When she learned new facts about him, or when she said something to him and he wrote a few words with his silver pencil, she had to be off by herself for a long time to think it over. When she was with him the main thought in her mind was to store up everything so that later she could live it over and remember. (McCullers, Heart 208-09)

Mick imagined that Singer would tell her things that were true; he would teach her if he could talk. She adored John Singer. She went to him when she was thinking about taking the job at Woolworth's because "what he had to tell her would be right - and if he said the job sounded O.K. then she would feel better about it" (McCullers, Heart 273).

Mick put all of her trust and faith in Singer.

John Singer becomes a divine being for Mick, Blount, and Dr. Copeland. Their frequent trips to his room can be seen as pilgrimages of sorts, a visit to the "holiest of

holies.” Talking to Singer, their own divine being, is much more gratifying than praying to an unseen god; Singer is there in the flesh, and the communication is not one-sided as it is in prayer. Singer, although divine to these three, is also a real human; consequently, therein lies the problem. These three characters do not understand that a divine being is only a human being who has been “made objective and distinct in order to be contemplated and revered. In the personality of God man worships his own attributes, the personified law of morality and the fulfilled moral nature of man” (Jordan 16). Blount, Dr. Copeland, and Mick all give Singer the qualities they want him to have, and those qualities are things they each think are important. Blount believes he understands the plight of the working class, Dr. Copeland sees the importance of racial equality to Singer, and Mick thinks that he understands the beauty of music. These characters possess the qualities that they believe Singer possesses, but they place Singer on a pedestal as a divine being, and in the process they are alienated from themselves. The things the characters believe in are moral; they could make changes in their world. The attributes that they give to Singer lie within themselves, as well. They cannot see these qualities in themselves, though, because their focus is directed too intensely to the god of their own making, John Singer. Religion keeps the masses oppressed, though, and even though these characters do not practice traditional religion, they do practice “Singer worship.” Their revolutionary spirits are dulled when they are in Singer’s presence.

Singer is not a divine being; he is a mortal man. Ironically, the man who is believed to understand everything really understands nothing that Blount, Dr. Copeland, or Mick tells him. In a letter to his friend Antonopolous, Singer writes about all three of these people. Singer says about Jake Blount, “He thinks we have a secret together but I

do not know what it is,” about Mick Kelly, “She knows I am deaf but she thinks I know about music,” and about Dr. Copeland, “This black man frightens me sometimes” (McCullers, Heart 184). The fierce need that each of them has to be near Singer smothers him at times. Antonopolous is the only person Singer cares for; he is just being polite to the others. After learning of his friend’s death, Singer most definitely does not think of any of his “disciples.” Once again, he is not a divine being; he is a mortal man whose grief is too much to bear. When he returns home after learning of Antonopolous’s death, he takes his own life with a gun he obtained from the jewelry shop where he worked.

The death of this “righteous, wise” man is a shock to his three “disciples.” None of them understand why Singer would commit suicide, and all three of them are left disillusioned, lonely, and hurt with no one to turn to for solace; their solace, formerly found in Singer, was dead. Dr. Copeland responds to the death of John Singer with immense sorrow. “With the death of that white man a dark sorrow had lain down in his heart [. . .] the mystery of his suicide had left him baffled and without support. There was neither beginning nor end to this sorrow. Nor understanding” (McCullers, Heart 284). Because he lives in a capitalist society, Dr. Copeland needs something or somebody to hang his hopes on. Instead of being self-reliant, he turned to the religion of John Singer. Like everything else in capitalism, this religion has kept him oppressed.

Jake Blount responds to Singer’s death not with the customary sadness but with anger:

Singer was dead. And the way he had felt when he first heard that he had killed himself was not sad - it was angry. He was before a wall. He

remembered all the innermost thoughts that he had told to Singer, and with his death it seemed to him that they were lost. And why had Singer wanted to end his life? Maybe he had gone insane. But anyway he was dead, dead, dead. He could not be seen or touched or spoken to, and the room where they had spent so many hours had been rented to a girl who worked as a typist. He could go there no longer. He was alone.

(McCullers, Heart 291)

Blount feels betrayed by Singer. He believed that he had found in Singer someone who understood the exploitation of the working class. He believed he had found someone to talk with about social injustice. He trusted Singer with his innermost thoughts and feelings, and Singer left him. The only person he trusted in the world is dead, and Blount is back in the same situation he was in when he first arrived in the mill town; he was completely alone.

Mick Kelly is the person who found Singer's body. Her response was one of self-inflicted physical pain to match the pain that Singer's death had inflicted on her soul:

She was the one found him. They had thought the noise was a backfire from a car, and it was not until the next day that they knew. She went in to play the radio. The blood was all over his neck and when her Dad came he pushed her out the room. She had run from the house. The shock wouldn't let her be still. She had run into the dark and hit herself with her fists [. . .] But through all those days she held down the job [. . .] Only at first when she went to bed at night she couldn't sleep. (McCullers, Heart 300)

Mick feels cheated; she is trapped in a dead-end job that Singer had said would be okay for her. Now there is no one to tell her that things are going to be okay. She is tired, sad, and disillusioned. Capitalism had triumphed again; another spirit was broken.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSION

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is for all intents and purposes an oppressive, gloomy picture of life in a Depression-era Southern mill town. McCullers has described a myriad of social problems and has offered no solution. However, when the reader finishes the novel and puts it down, “it is not with a feeling of emptiness and despair, but with a feeling of having been nourished by the truth [. . .] This is the way it is, one says to oneself, but not forever” (Sarton 20). A glimmer of hope exists at the end of the novel, and McCullers puts that hope in one of her main characters. The reader cannot expect Jake Blount to bring about a revolution; alcoholism will be a hindrance to him wherever he goes. Dr. Copeland is so sick that he cannot live by himself any longer; he does not have the physical strength or stamina to spearhead or even be a part of a revolutionary movement. The hope for change lies in Mick Kelly.

Although Singer, the god-figure of the novel, is dead, Mick Kelly, after thinking many negative thoughts as she ate a sundae and drank a beer at Biff Brannon’s café, remembers that she has Singer’s radio. The radio makes her think about music, and the music makes her think about saving money to buy a piano. She wonders what would happen if she missed a payment and people came to take it away, but Mick the dreamer returns; she decides she would fight anyone who tried to take her piano away (McCullers, Heart 302). She decided that there had to be “some good” that would come of this disastrous situation. Her resilient spirit and strong will are too much of a force within her for capitalism totally defeat her. She knows that she is oppressed now, but the reader

comes away from the novel with the feeling that Mick Kelly will be okay; she will do what is necessary to make good on her dreams. Mick is still young; she has not succumbed to the evils of alcoholism, even though she enjoys a beer from time to time, and she is not suffering from a debilitating illness. Mick is the only character in the novel who has the youthful idealism, exuberance, and will power that is necessary to bring about change. In her idealism Mick resembles Carson McCullers herself; McCullers was young when she wrote The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, and she used her own youthful idealism in this novel, hoping to bring social reform to the deserving working masses, black and white, of the South.

At times McCullers seemed as if she could see into the future, for in this novel she foreshadows events that would not happen for at least another twenty years. Dr. Copeland wants to gather African Americans together and march to Washington, D.C. Later on in our country this march did take place under the leadership of another doctor; Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the march for social equality for African Americans. At the beginning of the novel Jake Blount grabs Dr. Copeland off the street and takes him into Biff Brannon's café to have a drink, which the doctor refuses before leaving the establishment. This event is somewhat similar to the sit-ins at restaurants and lunch counters throughout the South in the name of integration. Even though Dr. Copeland does not enter the restaurant to make a social statement, his mere presence in a place for whites only foreshadows the eventual integration of African Americans into all facets of society. McCullers must have been pleasantly surprised to see some of the dreams she had for social reform come true.

Southerners dominated all literary activity in American from 1920 to 1950 (Young 261). People such as William Faulkner, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, as well as numerous others, helped bring popularity to Southern literature. The writers of fiction during this time were considered to be socially committed; they continued to write about interests, such as agrarian reform, industrial change, social deracination, and race relationships, that were already announced in the 1920s (Mellard 351). McCullers remained a socially conscious writer throughout her career. Her short novel The Ballad of the Sad Café (1943) also has a Southern mill town as its setting. The townspeople in this fictional mill town are oppressed, isolated, and poverty-stricken. In this novella McCullers expresses the disappointment and disillusionment of having an outlet for socialization given and then taken away, without consent, by the bourgeois. It is a venture into the world of people using others for purely selfish purposes, the type of phenomenon that is typical of capitalist society.

Carson McCullers wrote about race relations in almost all of her novels. She and other socially committed writers of the time used race relations as a subject of their fiction (Mellard 355). Richard Wright was writing masterfully created novels at this time of the prejudices and injustices of society in respect to the African American. His novel Native Son (1940) graphically describes the steps that Bigger Thomas feels he must make to ensure his survival in a white-dominated society. Carson McCullers's last novel, Clock Without Hands (1960), also describes race relations and prejudices. One of the story's characters is Sherman Pew, an African American boy who tries in vain to integrate into Southern society.

Southern writers during the Thirties tended to write “tragedies around common people, sometimes contemptible people, characters lacking in the social or economic status that would give them significance” (Holman 12). This is true for McCullers’s characters as well as those of other Southern writers. When one reads of Faulkner’s Snopes family or Steinbeck’s Joads, one realizes that these people are not the elite of society. Many of the stories of Southern writers depict some kind of tragedy because of the negative attitudes of failure, guilt, and frustration that have been handed down through generations of Southerners:

Among these attitudes (in the South) are the sense of failure, which comes from being the only group of Americans who have known military defeat military occupation, and seemingly unconquerable poverty; the sense of guilt, which comes from having been a part of America’s classic symbol of injustice - the enslavement and the segregation of the Negro; and the sense of frustration, which comes from the consistent inadequacy of the means at hand to wrestle with the problems to be faced. (Holman 87)

While it is true that the history of the South has been less than honorable at times, it is also true that the people of the South are incredibly resilient (Mellard 351). In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter McCullers expresses the negative senses of failure, guilt, and frustration; however, she leaves the reader with a positive picture of the resilient spirit of Mick Kelly and a hope for positive change.

Because of the negative senses experienced by Southerners, the laborers of this region seemed to be an easy target for the capitalists to exploit. Exploitation occurred on many levels in the South. The factory, to Karl Marx, was the ultimate instrument by

which capitalists exploited the laborers. However, in The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter it is not the factory that is directly responsible for the oppression of the main characters; none of them work in the cotton mill that employs most of the town's citizens. What oppresses them is the way of life that a factory brings to a town, a way of life that spreads through the town like a plague, engulfing all who stand in its path in hopelessness and poverty. The exploitation that mill workers face extends to all laborers, all races, and all ages in a mill town. Exploitation does not end with the Southern mill worker; McCullers has shown how life in a mill town in the South leads to exploitation of the African Americans and teenage workers. The oppression that Dr. Copeland and Mick Kelly feel is as real as the oppression that Jake Blount feels. It is important to understand the struggles these people face, the struggles against exploitation and oppression, so that we can understand the present and make effective changes (Eagleton 76).

Carson McCullers believed that people really are "worth more than a load of hay." Human beings should be treated as such, no matter their color, gender, ideology, or job. She sought to bring about social reform by depicting alienation and oppression in capitalist society. In The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter she has given an accurate picture of the world of capitalism and all its injustices to members of its society. She accomplished more with this one novel than most writers accomplish in a lifetime. She lets the reader know that hopelessness and despair are present in an oppressive society, but along with this she gives the reader hope for the overthrow of the oppressor. An empathetic writer and person, Carson McCullers was a true genius among Southern writers of the Thirties.

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