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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Lula Carson Smith McCullers grew up in Columbus, Georgia, a mill town hit hard by the Great Depression. Many consider Mick Kelly, the wistful young girl in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, to be the most autobiographical character she ever created. McCullers's father worked as a watch repairman while her mother nurtured her daughter's great love for music, believing wholeheartedly that Lula Carson would one day achieve fame. And, like Mick, the tomboyish author dreamed of escaping small-town life.



Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the Audio Guide. To go more in depth, you might focus on the reflections of one of the commentators.

Distribute the Reader's Guide essays "Introduction to the Novel," "Carson McCullers, 1917–1967," and "The Depression-Era South." Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they have learned.



Writing Exercise

The novel begins, "In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together. Early every morning they would come out from the house where they lived and walk arm in arm down the street to work." Based on what the students learned from the Audio Guide, ask them to write a paragraph on why McCullers might have chosen to begin the novel with this strong portrayal of companionship.



Homework

Read Part One, Chapters 1–3. Prepare your students to read two or three chapters per night in order to complete the book in ten lessons. The first three chapters introduce us to John Singer, Biff Brannon, and Mick Kelly.

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Lesson Two

FOCUS: Culture and History

Cultural and historical contexts give birth to the dilemmas and themes at the center of the novel. Studying these contexts and appreciating intricate details of the time and place help readers understand the motivations of the characters.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter was published in 1940, just as America emerged from the Great Depression, the worst economic collapse in the country's history. During the 1930s, radio became an essential part of the country's daily life. Through regional and national programming, the public gained access to free news, music, and other entertainment.

Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Distribute Handout One: The Golden Age of Radio. Explore the music of Arturo Toscanini and the NBC Symphony Orchestra. Clips of many performances are available on the Internet.

Like many American households in the late 1930s, Mick Kelly's family in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* does not own a radio. Mick eavesdrops at her neighbors' windows during the warm Southern evenings, hoping to hear her favorite shows:

She learned a lot about music during these free nights in the summer-time.

When she walked out in the rich parts of town every house had a radio. All the windows were open and she could hear the music very marvelous. After a while she knew which houses tuned in for the programs she wanted to hear.

Ask your class to imagine a world without radio, television, or the Internet. Have them write three paragraphs describing the way radio has changed our world. Encourage them to consider the social, political, and cultural effects, as well as the way radio might have affected someone in the 1930s, like Mick, who had never enjoyed easy access to music, news, and entertainment.



Homework

Have students read Part One, Chapters 4–5. In these chapters, we are introduced to two additional main characters, Jake Blount and Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland. In many ways, Copeland and Blount are parallel characters. Ask your students to think about ways in which their worldviews and philosophies of life are similar, and how they differ.

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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter employs a third-person narrator who does not participate in the novel’s action, but has access to the private thoughts and actions of the characters. McCullers shifts perspective from one character to another using limited omniscient point of view. Third-person narration also allows the author to choose the distance from which we view the action as we are taken inside the mind of a character or shown only what we would see if we were a fly on the wall.



Discussion Activities

Each of the first five chapters is told from the point of view of a different character: John Singer, Biff Brannon, Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, and Dr. Copeland. Read “Major Characters in the Novel” from the Reader’s Guide, then discuss the ways McCullers uses the narrative lens by examining the following scenes.

In the novel’s opening lines, Singer and Antonapoulos walk “arm in arm down the street to work.” How close do students feel to the characters? Now examine the scene in Chapter 3 where Mick vandalizes the new house. “She stood in the middle of the empty room and stared at what she had done. The chalk was still in her hands and she did not feel really satisfied. She was trying to think of the name of this fellow who had written this music she heard over the radio last winter.” Do the students feel closer to Mick than they do to Singer? If so, how does McCullers achieve this? As the novel progresses, why might it become important that we feel closer to some characters than others?



Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one character that has appeared so far. Have students rewrite the first scene of the novel in first-person point of view from the perspective of this character. What equips their character to tell the story? Have them reflect on why this story might be better told from multiple perspectives.



Homework

Have students read Part One, Chapter 6 and Part Two, Chapters 1–2. Ask them to begin thinking about what motivates the characters. What does each character want?

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Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter defies the conventions of literary fiction. The novel does not follow a straightforward, linear plot, nor does it focus most closely on the actions of a single individual. The novel examines the lives of five main characters and their struggle against isolation and despair. McCullers's empathetic portrayal of the various personalities highlights their differences as well as the common adventure of the human experience.

McCullers intentionally crafted a composite cast of characters whose stories converge rather than focusing on a single protagonist. Literary scholars debate which character, John Singer or Mick Kelly, is the true "protagonist" of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. McCullers compared Singer's character to the hub of a wheel; most of the action of the novel revolves around him. Yet, Mick Kelly's journey toward adulthood gives the story its trajectory.



Discussion Activities

Distribute Handout Two: The Southern Gothic Literary Tradition. Discuss the ways *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is a "Southern Gothic" novel. How important is setting in the novel? Which characters are "grotesques" and what, if any, unpleasant aspects of society do they represent? Do they meet McCullers's goal of creating grotesque characters whose physical incapacity symbolizes a spiritual void?



Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose a character who serves as antagonist to either John Singer or Mick Kelly and write a brief essay. How is this person important to the story? Does the antagonist make the main character appear stronger, or more flawed? How might this be important as the novel progresses?



Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapters 3–5. Ask them to pay close attention to the passage in Chapter 5 when Mick goes to her "inside room," and to consider what we learn about her character during that scene.

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Lesson Five

FOCUS: Figurative Language

Writers use figurative language such as imagery, similes, and metaphors to help the reader visualize and experience events and emotions in a story. Imagery—a word or phrase that refers to sensory experience (sight, sound, smell, touch, or taste)—helps create a physical experience for the reader and adds immediacy to literary language. Imagery can also project emotion, enabling the author to imply a mood without disrupting the narrative to inform the reader of a character’s emotional state.

Carson McCullers’s writing style tends to be straightforward and unadorned, but sometimes uses figurative language to describe emotion. A metaphor compares one thing to another. By revealing similarity, metaphors provide insight to a character, an event, or an issue. Metaphors do not use the words “like” or “as.” Here, McCullers uses a metaphor to describe Mick’s private thoughts and feelings:

She sat down on the steps and laid her head on her knees. She went into the inside room. With her it was like there was two places—the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. Mister Singer was in both rooms.... The songs she thought about were there. And the symphony.

A simile expresses the resemblance between different things, and usually begins with “like” or “as.” McCullers uses a simile to describe how music, like candy, affects Mick:

There was one special fellow’s music that made her heart shrink up every time she heard it. Sometimes this fellow’s music was like little colored pieces of crystal candy, and other times it was the softest, saddest thing she had ever imagined about.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



The reader is privy to Mick’s private thoughts and feelings as well as her public reactions. Why would McCullers want us to see what is in Mick’s “inside room?” Ask your students to describe music that sounds like “little colored pieces of crystal candy.” McCullers consciously chose to have Mick think of music as candy. Why is this comparison appropriate? What does it reveal about Mick’s personality?

Metaphorical titles provide clues to a novel’s meaning. Ask students to write a one-page essay on how the novel’s title informs our understanding of the book. Can a person’s heart be like a hunter? Is the word “lonely” important? Would another adjective (such as weary, hungry, or fierce) have the same effect? Ask them to suggest other metaphors and similes that could describe the novel or one of its characters.



Homework

Read Part Two, Chapters 6–7. What special present does Singer give to his four friends? How does each of them react? What do their different reactions reveal about their personalities?

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Lesson Six

FOCUS: Symbols

Symbols are persons, places, or things in a narrative that have significance beyond a literal understanding. The craft of storytelling depends on symbols to present ideas and point toward new meanings. Most frequently, a specific object will be used to refer to (or symbolize) a more abstract concept. The repeated appearance of an object suggests a non-literal, or figurative, meaning attached to the object. Symbols are often found in the book's title, at the beginning and end of the story, within a profound action, or in the name or personality of a character. The life of a novel is perpetuated by generations of readers interpreting and reinterpreting the main symbols. By identifying and understanding symbols, readers can reveal new interpretations of the novel.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is structured as if it were a fugue, a composition in which themes are stated by each voice in succession, building to a unified whole. From Mick's ambition to become a professional musician, to Singer's purchase of a radio, to the soulful wail of Willie's harmonica, musical symbols inform the reader's understanding of the characters and help set the overall tone of the novel. They represent characters' feelings, motives, and ambitions.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Use the following references to examine symbols. Students can discuss their responses in groups or craft written responses.

Mick's violin:

Mick tries unsuccessfully to build a violin out of a broken ukulele. "It seemed to her as she thought back over the last month that she had never really believed in her mind that the violin would work. But in her heart she had kept making herself believe. And even now it was hard not to believe a little." Discuss how the violin symbolizes Mick's musical aspirations. How might the thwarted attempt at building the violin foreshadow Mick's future?

Music and the radio:

Mick's fascination with music mirrors her determination to venture beyond small-town life toward a larger world. When Singer buys a radio for his room, Mick asks if she can "come in and listen sometimes" while he is at work. How is the radio a symbol for Mick? How is it a symbol for Singer? Why would Singer buy a radio he cannot hear? What does this say about his desire to connect with the people who visit his room?

Willie's harmonica:

Dr. Copeland's son, Willie, always carries a harmonica. McCullers uses Willie's "sad and empty" music to symbolize Dr. Copeland's mood as he listens to the footsteps of his children walking away. After Willie is hurt, does his music come to have additional meaning? What purpose does it serve?



Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapters 8–10.

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Lesson Seven

FOCUS: Character Development

Novels trace the development of characters who encounter a series of challenges. Most characters contain a complex balance of virtues and vices. Internal and external forces require characters to question themselves, overcome fears, or reconsider dreams. The protagonist may undergo profound change. A close study of character development maps, in each character, the evolution of motivation, personality, and belief. The tension between a character's strengths and weaknesses keeps the reader guessing about what might happen next and the protagonist's eventual success or failure.

At the beginning of the novel, Mick Kelly, an idealistic young girl, dreams of becoming a great musician, an inventor, and a world traveler. As the novel unfolds, we witness Mick's journey toward maturity. Mick childishly frightens her brother, Bubber, after he accidentally shoots Baby, but later consoles him. When her relationship with Harry becomes sexual, Mick assures him that it was not his fault. "I wasn't any kid," she says, "But now I wish I was, though." Later, she bravely offers to quit school and take a job at a local department store to help her poverty-stricken family. By the novel's end, she assumes responsibility for payments on Singer's radio and maturely considers ways she might be able to afford a piano one day.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercise



Read Handout Three: The Limits of Human Communication. All the main characters experience failures to communicate. They feel isolated and alone. Each has something he or she desires above all else. Each has something he or she loves most and, by the end of the novel, each suffers a loss. Ask your students to consider the ways love, desire, and the struggle against loneliness compel the characters to act as they do.

Read aloud the section of the novel when all the characters gather in Singer's room on the same night. Look closely at the actions, reactions, and body language of each person. How do these responses help define our understanding of each?

The "epistolary" form, telling a story through the use of letters, allows an author to convey a character's viewpoint without the interference of other characters. In Part Two, Chapter 7, John Singer writes to Antonapoulos, "The others all have something they hate. And they all have something they love more than eating or sleeping or wine or friendly company." Ask your students to choose a character in the novel other than John Singer, and then write a letter from this character to another person in the novel. What does their character love and hate? How does the character feel about those around him or her?



Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapters 11–13. Ask your students to review the novel and identify two important turning points. Which characters were most affected? Why?

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Lesson Eight

FOCUS: The Plot Unfolds

The author crafts a plot structure to create expectations, increase suspense, and develop characters. The pacing of events can make a novel either predictable or riveting. Foreshadowing and flashbacks allow the author to defy the constraints of time. Sometimes an author can confound a simple plot by telling stories within stories. In a conventional work of fiction, the peak of the story's conflict—the climax—is followed by the resolution, or denouement, in which the effects of that climactic action are presented.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter does not conform to a traditional plot structure. McCullers wrote the novel just as she would have composed a piece of music, arranging each voice so that the effect was a unified theme, examining the way disparate lives converge in order to attempt to understand the commonality of humankind.

Discussion Activities

Use the homework assignment from the last lesson to have students present the most important turning points in the novel. Some of the turning points are Alice's death at the beginning of Part Two; Portia telling Dr. Copeland about the amputation of Willie's legs; Singer's purchase of the radio; and Mick's decision to take the job at Woolworth's in order to help her family. Ask students to refer to key passages from the story, explaining why the turning points they identified are the most significant. How do these turning points provide a general arc or trajectory to the story? Identify the rising action, climax, and resolution of the story.

Writing Exercise

The novel, told from multiple viewpoints, closely examines the lives of five main characters. Ask students to write a short essay considering the following questions: How does McCullers integrate the lives of these characters into the plot? Does the use of multiple narrators fail to create a coherent plot? If so, how? If not, why not?

Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapters 14–15. In tonight's reading, your students will come to the novel's climax—the death of Antonapoulos and Singer's subsequent suicide. Without giving these developments away, ask them to consider why Singer reacts as he does. Are they shocked by his actions? Why or why not?

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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Themes of the Novel

Themes are the central, recurring subjects of a novel. As characters grapple with circumstances such as racism, class, or unrequited love, profound questions will arise in the reader's mind about human life, social pressures, and societal expectations. Classic themes include intellectual freedom versus censorship, the relationship between one's personal moral code and larger political justice, and spiritual faith versus rational considerations. A novel often reconsiders these age-old debates by presenting them in new contexts or from new points of view.



Discussion Activities and Writing Exercises



Use the following questions to stimulate discussion or provide writing exercises in order to interpret the novel in specific ways. Explore the statements *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* makes about the following:

- **Isolation:** “Each evening the mute walked alone for hours in the street. . . . In his face there came to be a brooding peace that is seen most often in the faces of the very sorrowful or the very wise. But still he wandered through the streets of the town, always silent and alone.”
 1. What is McCullers saying about loneliness? Is there something noble in keeping oneself apart? Why or why not?
 2. John Singer's disability creates a communication barrier. How are the other characters separated from society? Are these things within their control?
- **Racism:** Dr. Copeland tells a group of students, “Some of you young people here this morning may feel the need to be teachers or nurses or leaders of your race. But most of you will be denied. You will have to sell yourselves for a useless purpose in order to keep alive. . . . The time will come when the riches in us will not be held in scorn and contempt.”
 1. What does Dr. Copeland blame for the racist society in which he lives? Does he accept any responsibility?
 2. What values does Dr. Copeland believe will combat discrimination? What does he see as the black community's “greatest need?”
- **Communication:** When Portia tells her father about the amputation of Willie's legs, Dr. Copeland says, “I am deaf. I cannot understand.”
 1. Why does he react in this way? What is McCullers illustrating by Dr. Copeland's inability to accept what he has heard?
 2. Examine other examples of situations in which the novel's characters cannot communicate effectively. Are the barriers to effective communication self-imposed, or are they influenced solely by society? Why?



Homework

Have students finish reading the novel. Ask them to begin their essays, using the Essay Topics. Outlines are due at the next class.

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Lesson Ten

FOCUS: What Makes a Book Great?

Great stories articulate and explore the mysteries of our daily lives in the larger context of the human struggle. The writer's voice, style, and use of language inform the plot, characters, and themes. By creating opportunities to learn, imagine, and reflect, a great novel is a work of art that affects many generations of readers, changes lives, challenges assumptions, and breaks new ground.

Discussion Activities

Ask students to make a list of the characteristics of a great book. What elevates a novel to greatness? Ask them to discuss, within groups, other books they know that include some of the same characteristics. Do any of these books remind them of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*? Is this a great novel?

A great writer can be the voice of a generation. What kind of voice does McCullers provide through the stories of the five main characters? What does this voice tell us about the concerns and dreams of McCullers's generation? How does this voice represent the Depression-era South?

Have each group choose the single most important theme of the novel. Ask a spokesperson from each group to explain his or her decision. Write these themes on the board. Are all the groups in agreement?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to answer the following questions: If you were the voice of your generation, what would be your most important message? Why might you choose to convey this in a novel rather than a speech or an essay? What story would you tell to get your point across?

Have students work on their essays in class. Be available to assist with outlines, drafts, and arguments. Have each student partner with another to edit outlines and/or rough drafts. Provide students with characteristics of a well-written essay.

Homework

Students should work on their essays. See the Essay Topics. For additional prompts, see the Reader's Guide "Discussion Questions." Rough drafts are due during the next class.

The Golden Age of Radio

In the darkest hours of the Great Depression, reassurance and a little distraction came from a surprising place—out of thin air. Radio, invented by the Italian physicist Guglielmo Marconi at the end of the nineteenth century, had developed into a viable broadcast medium by the third decade of the twentieth. America’s first radio station, KDKA in Pittsburgh, went on the air November 2, 1920. By 1923, the first radio network had been set up, and by 1926, the Radio Corporation of America (RCA) and Westinghouse had created the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), whose Blue and Red networks would come to dominate America’s airwaves.

During the 1930s, radio became an essential part of the country’s daily life. Through local and network programming, radio allowed the general public access to news, music, and other entertainment at the flip of a switch, free of charge so long as one could afford the cost of a receiver. For the first time in American history, people from all walks of life and in every region of the country found themselves participating in the same experience at the same time, whether they lived in rural communities or big cities.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt, president from 1933 to 1945, used radio to deliver “fireside chats” that edified and inspired the public. Nothing in the nation’s history had prepared its citizens for the economic hardships of the Great Depression or the international crisis of the late 1930s, when Hitler, Mussolini, and the Japanese pushed the world toward war. President Roosevelt spoke simply

about issues relevant to the lives of all Americans: unemployment, the economy, national defense, and, ultimately, the need for America to enter World War II. Americans gathered around the radio and listened.

Radio sought both to educate and to entertain. Musical variety shows were popular, as were serial comedy shows like *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, which had a national audience estimated at 40 million—one third of the American population. Radio dramas were popular too, and the power of the new medium to persuade was thrillingly demonstrated on October 30, 1938, when the young Orson Welles produced a radio adaptation of H.G. Wells’s novella *The War of the Worlds* and delivered it in the style of a live news report. Thousands of Americans who tuned in late panicked, believing Martians were really attacking America.

During this golden age of radio, broadcasters maintained a strong commitment to “high culture” in their programming. In 1937, after the celebrated conductor Arturo Toscanini stepped down as music director of the New York Philharmonic, NBC created an orchestra especially for him to lead, and began a series of regular broadcasts from Studio 8H in Manhattan’s Rockefeller Center. For 17 years, until the maestro retired, these broadcast concerts were among the most listened-to programs on American radio.



The Southern Gothic Literary Tradition

Gothic fiction is a literary term for a genre whose prevailing mood is terror or suspense, whose setting is an isolated castle or monastery, and whose characters include a hero beset by mysterious or threatening forces. The predecessors to modern horror, gothic novels use ghost stories, madness, vampires, and perversity to develop a pleasant sense of fear in the reader. From the 1790s through the nineteenth century, gothic literature comprised everything from Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe's macabre stories to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. Only in the early to mid-twentieth century did such writers as Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Tennessee Williams, and William Faulkner use it to explore less supernatural, more earthly monsters, thus pioneering what came to be called the "Southern Gothic" literary tradition.

The "grotesque," one of the key components of Southern Gothic writing, portrays deeply flawed characters, decayed, claustrophobic settings, or sinister events, often linking them to racism, poverty, or violence. Though grotesque characters or situations can sometimes be hard to take, carefully applied they allow talented writers to exaggerate their material without betraying it. The grotesque can also comment on unpleasant aspects of society without appearing overly preachy.

McCullers used grotesque characters to illuminate universal truths about the human condition. She said, "Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write

about—people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love—their spiritual isolation."

Hasty critics eventually began applying the gothic label carelessly to all Southern fiction, mistaking every idiosyncrasy of character or setting for the grotesque. McCullers reacted against the overuse of the "Southern Gothic" label in an essay titled "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature." For her, the roots of Southern fiction were firmly planted in realism, and did not depend on supernatural incidents or mysticism. She admired such Russian novelists as Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy and thought they had a lot in common with Southern writers, since citizens in both Russia and the South were defined largely by social class and their relationship to the land.

At its best, Southern fiction applies gothic elements within a framework of social realism. This fiction avoids stereotype by creating unusual characters, and imbues them with qualities that cause the reader to examine the world of the novel and the human experience more closely.



The Limits of Human Communication

In the original outline for *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers described the novel as “man’s revolt against his inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as possible.” Not surprisingly, the delicate balance between hearing, listening, and understanding crops up again and again in the novel. Originally titled *The Mute*, the book is populated with characters who struggle to express their feelings and, for various reasons, fail. Some characters are hampered by a physical disability, while others fail at effective communication simply because they are incapable of connecting emotionally.

In the novel’s opening scenes John Singer and Spiros Antonapoulos, both deaf, share a comfortable life together. After work each day, the men return to the home they share. Singer relates the day’s events to his friend through sign language, his hands forming “the words in a series of swift designs,” but the childish Greek has little to add to the conversation.

After Antonapoulos is committed to an asylum, Singer lives alone in a society in which he cannot fully communicate. The friendships he forms with his hearing neighbors are tenuous at best, in part because they, taking for granted that he will adjust to the hearing world, make little effort to accommodate him.

The longer Singer is away from Antonapoulos, the greater his sense of isolation. During his visits with Antonapoulos, Singer does most of the “talking,” with little interaction from his friend. Similarly, though the other characters talk constantly to Singer, he responds infrequently and reveals little of himself. Singer reads the lips of Jake Blount, Biff

Brannon, Dr. Copeland, and Mick Kelly, but feels little connection to what they are saying:

At first he had not understood the four people at all. They talked and they talked—and as the months went on they talked more and more. He became so used to their lips that he understood each word they said. And then after a while he knew what each one of them would say before he began, because the meaning was always the same.

Ordinary verbal communication in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* often results in failures and misunderstandings. Though Biff, Jake, Dr. Copeland, and Mick visit Singer for months, when they all happen to meet in his room halfway through the novel, they are incapable of communicating with each other, and address themselves “mainly to the mute.” Ironically, Singer responds by writing a long letter to Antonapoulos, though he knows his friend is “unable to make out the meaning of words on paper.”

Ultimately, none of the characters in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* gets through to any of the others. Human communication proves ineffective and unsatisfying. McCullers’s tender, complex portrayal of diverse characters illustrates the innate need for people to communicate. Each character yearns to share his or her inner thoughts with another person, but they fail because of the limitations they find, both in others and within themselves.

