

The Inner Cosmic Space in Carson McCullers

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The focus of attention in Carson McCullers' novels—*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*,¹ *Reflections in a Golden Eye*² and *The Member of the Wedding*³—is the inner cosmic space of the characters. The inner cosmic space implies that reality occupies a space within the individual and actual objects and events are also within him. These novels demonstrate how objects and events enter the inner cosmic space and generate anxiety, and at times, reduce the world view to absurdity. Characters seeking an "inward reckoning" (RGE, p. 66) feel a sense of personal loneliness that each must confront, upon the silence of God, as a fact of existence. The increased self-reliance to structure experience places a great premium upon a responsible decision. However, anxiety is what each person must suffer as a consequence of his choice, or in the absence of choice to be condemned to eternal guilt. There is no escape from the sense of sadness that individuals feel in life. Even love becomes pathetic and often absurd, be it the case of a deaf-mute, a lovestruck soldier, or an adolescent girl.

An intensely Southern writer, McCullers' locale for her novels is the deep South; and the elemental presence of its seasons is intricately woven into the themes of alienation and decay of the Southern tradition. For instance, in *The Member of the Wedding*, heat intensifies loneliness and activates the desire for

physical and emotional contact. With other Southern writers McCullers shares a past, "a sense of likeness, and the possibility of reading a small history in a universal light."⁴ Through the Georgian locale McCullers universalizes the anxiety and absurdity of man's inner cosmic space.

In *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie Addams, a twelve-year-old Georgian girl, seeks to understand herself and her surrounding. She is a motherless girl who seeks company of Berenice, the colored cook, and John Henry, her six-year-old cousin. In the absence of care and proper guidance she depends greatly upon her feelings and perceptions to structure experience. The world seems to her a "strange place" (MOW, p. 7), and home life cramping. She is a "member of nothing in the world" and is an "unjoined person;" (MOW, p. 1) she wishes she was someone else and thus changes her name (MOW, p. 6). She decides to run away from home but does not know where to go (MOW, p. 34). Her aimless life—until she becomes fascinated by her brother's wedding—is representative of most characters in these novels.

There is a deep sense of estrangement among characters who feel like "half-persons" unable to come to terms with reality. They are not "grotesques," as Ihab Hassan thinks.⁵ They only express this estrangement either through violent behavior, like Honey Brown—who every once a while runs through Sugarville "Hogwild" (MOW, p. 122)—or through a death-wish like Private Williams—who seeks death as an escape from human absurdity. Individuals feel the intense drudgery of routine and become, like Frankie, "sick unto death" (MOW, p. 14). Desperation overwhelms them when they realize that each person is separate and isolated from the other: "I am I, and you are you" (MOW, p. 109). It is true that this awareness imbues the mind with "various colors of strange tones"—as it does the mind of Private Williams in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*—it also leaves

a "void of form" in his inner cosmic space (RGE, p. 62). This personal sense of estrangement fuses with the cosmic alienation and further heightens the human absurdity. All of them question the purpose of life, or indulge in the "teleological propensity," as Blount calls it. (HLH, p. 53). Persons want to run away from the smoldering universe and from people but they also know in their innermost selves that there is "no good place" to go to (HLH, p. 41). Like Mick Kelly, they cry: "I Want—I want—I want" (HLH, p. 41); and, remind us of Saul Bellow's Eugene Henderson who also expresses this need.

Individuals feel suffocated when they realize that there are really no answers to the teleological questions that crowd their inner cosmic space. The imagery of suffocation is repeatedly employed by McCullers in her novels; and, in *The Member of The Wedding* it acquires different shapes that are related to the changing feeling of the heroine. When Frankie's life is purposeless her heart is squeezed hard—it is "a tightness in her throat that would not break" (MOW, p. 19). When she has a purpose, that is when she decides to go to The Winter Hill wedding, her heart releases its tightness—it "suddenly opened and divided" like "two wings" (MOW, p. 42). When finally, the dream turns sour she again feels the suffocation: "queer as a person drowning" (MOW, p. 149). Most characters, for example Mick Kelly and Alison Langalon, feel this suffocation but in their case it is not as clear as in Frankie's. To fight the pain of suffocation individuals try to participate in world events through active choice. When they are unable to do so they become frightened. It is not the dark night that Frankie is afraid of but her inability to shape the world through active participation. "She was afraid because in the war they would not include her, and because the world seemed somehow separate from herself" (MOW, p. 21). Nevertheless, the act of choosing brings with it the anxiety of the unknown.

This anxiety appears in the areas of marriage, friendship, and vocation. Frankie's worry whether the freaks will get married reflects her own anxiety about marriage as she regards herself a freak (MOW, p. 18). John Singer befriends a mute, Spiros Antonapoulous, and constantly worries if their friendship will last. Finally his fears come true as Antonapoulous suddenly dies. Mick Kelly is anxious about the new job she takes up as a clerk at Woolworth. In all the three cases the decision for something is also a decision against something else. The anxiety born out of self-renunciation and fear of the future disturb the inner cosmic space of these characters. Their anxiety is not so much related with events but is a projection of the fear of the effects of those events in the future.

McCullers attaches greater importance to the perception of and the feel for an event than the actual event itself. Since events in themselves are of secondary importance they are dispensed with quickly; they are mainly used in the novels to generate surprise. For instance, in *The Member of the Wedding*, Frankie broods on the wedding but when the actual wedding comes in Part Three, it is swiftly disposed of in a few sentences. Human feeling, to McCullers, implies a combination of bodily events and inward experience and the way these two are translated into the inner cosmic space of characters. Frankie, for instance, does not remember the face of her brother or his bride. She sees blank circles where their faces should be; they are "more like a feeling than a picture" (MOW, p. 27). To her they are like a touch in which the bodily event, expressed in their visit, and the inward experience, expressed through the feeling of the visit, come together. She finds the feeling strange as there is no rational explanation for it. The strange feeling is brought out clearly in the way Captain Penderton feels about Private Williams (RGE, p. 65). Possibly seeing others as a feeling, individuals understand their apartness from and attachment to others. Frankie feels about Jarvis and Janice that "They are the we of we" (MOW, p. 39). To McCul-

lers the present is joyful only when individuals understand the tragic limitations of life and its possibilities. The hoary past and the hazardous future are two hinges "to a swinging door" that opens upon a life in the present (MOW, p. 57). Those who try to live in the past or the future, like Biff Brannon, only dangle between the two (HLH, p. 273) and are caught in the absurdity of their situation. Biff incidentally reminds us of Bellow's protagonist Joseph in the *Dangling Man*.

One can come out of this absurdity by "widening" oneself through the act of love, otherwise one continues to be "caught," and wants only "to break something or break himself" (MOW, p. 114). The answer to suicide or death-wish is love and friendship: "There are times when a man's greatest need is to have someone to love, some focal point for his diffused emotions" (RGE, p. 33). However, love also brings with it pain as it results in disillusionment and dislocation.

Love is not seen as an alchemy for the affected souls but as a traumatic experience. It does not stay even if on rare occasions it may be possessed. It leaves behind more pain than the joy it gives. The theme of blighted love permeates McCullers' novels. It constitutes her tragic vision of life. For instance Berenice's first love and husband, Ludie, suddenly dies of pneumonia. Since then Berenice suffers pain even though she marries surrogate-husbands one after another. Her last surrogate-husband destroys her eye and in a way destroys the love-dream she nurtures. It is at the "tail of her eye" she frequently imagines Ludie on the street after his death.

The sudden death of the loved one is always there as part of the cosmic absurdity in McCullers novels. Frankie's cousin, John Henry, whom she has begun to love, suddenly dies of meningitis; Singer's friend dies; Portia's brother,

Willie, becomes lame; and Biff's wife, Alice, dies. This makes characters think of the "boundary of death" and it brings in them a dread of the unknown (HLH, p. 172). They think, as Jake Blount does upon Singer's death, that death is like a "wall, a flight of stairs, an open road" (HLH, p. 260). It continues to remain a "mystery of living matter" (HLH, p. 109).

If McCullers' is not a godless world, God is certainly silent in it: "God was silent" probably that was why characters like Mick are "reminded" of Him (HLH, p. 94). God does not "manifest" Himself in McCullers universe: "Manifest my foot," says Berenice (MOW, p. 90). Characters occasionally criticize God but mostly they do not believe in Him. For instance, Mick Kelly says, "I don't believe in God any more than I do Santa Claus." (HLH, p. 39).

In the absence of God man must always retain his freedom through constant creation. Though creation remains a mystery in the novels, it is expressed through lateral thinking. Lateral thought does not follow a systematic plan but is a habit of the mind that brings different things together. It contains an element of surprise when a connection is made. Only after a connection is established it can be explained by vertical or rational thinking through which we solve daily issues. For instance, in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, Mick Kelly suddenly realizes that her father is "a real separate person" and afterward she feels an "older person" (HLH, p. 78). This has an element of surprise in it. This is why characters find the world a "sudden place" (MOW, p. 4) and feel the joy of an "inexplicable connection," as Frankie does between herself and "other total strangers" (MOW, p. 55).

The making of sudden connections within the inner cosmic space points to the nascent gnostic mood in McCullers, that spiritual truth comes immediately

and suddenly. The element of surprise is translated into the language itself and is often used as a stylistic device to arouse a sharp response from the reader. Frankie, for instance, "suddenly" belongs to the town once she falls in love with the wedding (MOW, p. 44.)

Language is seen as a unique human gesture by McCullers and, therefore, facial expressions and gestures become more important than the logical syntax of the language. In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* two mutes speak to each other through gestures. Though Singer is deaf by birth he is not a "real mute. He only feels strange to speak because people do not understand him well (HLH, p. 9). The irony is complete. Language becomes a travesty of the spoken word and it acquires greater force than it probably does in Joseph Heller's *Catch 22*. Facial expressions become an important aspect of communication. In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* Jake Blount talks to mute Singer while Singer's facial expression shows understanding. Singer's eyes make others think that he "heard things nobody else had ever heard, that he knew things no one had even guessed before" (HLH, p. 19). Music is the most intense gesture in McCullers' novels. It is used as a backdrop for the loss of friendship or love and the end of a dream. Music promises a peace that characters search. For instance, Mick Kelly feels that if she was next to a "real piano" she would have "some place to herself" (HLH, p. 40). However, the music is always transitory and painful whether it is played by the crazy Jewish pianist, Schwartzbaum, or the colored boy. Music leaves an uneasy feeling in the minds of characters. For instance, when Mick Kelly hears Beethoven's Third Symphony stop, she feels that her "heart is like a rabbit" and she develops a "terrible hurt" in her (HLH, p. 92).

Always there is a "terrible hurt" around which the novels are built. It is expressed in a single event: be it a wedding, a suicide or a murder. The pattern

of the novels is intricately and neatly woven by McCullers and the central event around which the novel revolves is never lost. In *The Member of the Wedding*, the single event that binds the novel together is the wedding. Its telling is like "a song" (MOW, p. 57). Section One begins with the wedding and shows the pain it represents, and Section Two the joy it promises. Section Three shows the breaking of the dream. During this time Frankie has grown from adolescence to womanhood to maturity. The jasmine has flowered and is aware it will wilt and die. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* drags at places and this makes the inner plan of the novel boring. Each character is given a voice in each chapter. Though this method allows the delineation of the inner cosmic space of characters it fails to provide variety. *Reflections in a Golden Eye* is flawlessly built.

In this paper I have touched upon themes of estrangement, anxiety, love and death and tried to show how these themes affect the inner cosmic space of these characters. The reality of the outer world and events pales into insignificance when compared to the impact of these on the minds of the characters. In their effort to impose a meaning upon the erratic and absurd world around them these characters reveal an attitude of mind that one could term existentialist. These characters are far too simple to be aware of the philosophical dimensions of their attitudes, but their attitudes point to Carson McCullers own orientation which, I have tried to show, is existentialist.

Notes

1. Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974). All subsequent references to the text are made from this edition and marked as MOW; they are incorporated in the main body of the paper.
2. Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (Boston: Moughton Mifflin Company, 1967). All subsequent references to the text are made from this edition and marked as HLH; they are incorporated in the main body of the paper.

3. Carson McCullers, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company 1968). All subsequent references to the text are made from this edition and marked as RGE; they are incorporated in the main body of the paper.
4. Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968), 58.
5. Ihab Hassan *Contemporary American Literature 1945-1972* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1974), 68.