CHAPTER VIII
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Carson McCullers is a perceptive and imaginative symbolist whose novels treat of human problems with sympathy and understanding. In art as in life, she deviates from the trodden path, and her intensely poetic and richly symbolic fictional works bear witness to the 'sacred disorder' of her mind. Her concern is not with the trifles or trivialities that lie upon the surface of mundane existence, but "with passions, conflicts and problems which, however their forms may change, belong to the essential texture of life."¹ Plucked out from raw life, her novels invariably symbolise the universal condition of spiritual isolation and the consequent hunger for communication. The method she follows is that of suggestion, and this characteristic technique is "rather like a chess game where every move is a symbol and requires the reader's counter move."²

As already mentioned, McCullers is a masterful portrayer of character and in this respect, she is different from her contemporaries in the sense that despite the symbolic or metaphoric functions, her characters are quite convincing and truc to life.
She admirably depicts the state of inner isolation through a set of well-chosen and sharply observed characters who represent the alienated and helpless victims caught in the tragic web of circumstances.

Critics have often attacked her morbid concern with the perverted and grotesque characters. Like Flannery O'Connor and Sherwood Anderson, McCullers also explores the lives of isolated grotesques of the American South. There is a plethora of maimed and deformed characters in McCullers' fictional universe. She makes deliberate use of these physical and psychological freaks to symbolise the agony and pangs of alienation. Insulated by their own oddities and singularities they represent the incapacity to give and take love. The soul-stunted deaf-mute, the dwarf and the female giantess are exemplars of the wretchedness of this human condition. The novels of the early period like *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* and *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* are comparatively more grotesque than the rest of her works. She took a tentative step in the direction of the grotesque in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and as it proved to be a great success, took bolder steps in the subsequent works. *Reflections in a Golden Eye* crystallizes the odd experiences and the populous solitude of a handful of characters at a Southern military base, whereas *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, intensely autobiographical, is
centred around the psychic void of the Amazonian female Amelia, dwelling in the heart of solitude.

Another group of characters used metaphorically to represent the universal phenomenon of isolation consists of the adolescents. Sandwiched between childhood and adulthood, but belonging to neither, they are eloquent symbols of isolation. They do not feel at home in the company of both children and adults. Their unjoined state is symbolised by Frankie always hanging around in the doorways. She never gets inside and ever remains an outsider. Her kitchen world represents the adolescent's feeling of confinement and the sense of being locked up. McCullers has an astonishing insight into the working of the adolescent mind. She treats them with tender concern and sympathetic understanding. The work vibrates with a kind of hypersensitivity as she dives deep into Frankie's mind, graphically describing her chameleon-like moods and mercurial temperament. The Member of the Wedding is undoubtedly an excellent study of American adolescence. Frankie's intense longing to identify herself with the bridal pair and her subsequent frustration represent everyman's search for identity and the irrepressible desire to belong. Like Frankie, Mick also is a typical representative of the herd of loners. Her problems and confusions mirror those of the adult world. Like the oyster keeping the pearl, she cherishes the fond hope of
becoming a concert pianist. But her dreams are stifled by the acute financial crisis in the family. Making a desperate compromise with life she turns into a breadwinner at the age of fourteen. She shares the common fate of most females, in her inability to reach the heights she has aimed at.

Negroes, alienated among the whites and helpless to retaliate, frequently appear in McCullers' works. They appear like solitary black islands in the surging white ocean. Characters like Doctor Copeland and Willie, bearing the brunt of racial injustice, gnaw at the readers' hearts even long after the perusal. The cruelty of racial discrimination and the poignancy of the consequent isolation are delineated most touchingly in her last novel, *Clock Without Hands* in which Sherman Pew, the mulatto youth, is bombed by the fanatic whites of his neighbourhood. McCullers is a pastmaster in portraying the simple, homely Negro cooks like Portia and Berenice, who are as enduring as the earth. Their characterization is so magnificent that they even vie with many of Faulkner's black characters.

McCullers draws the veil of allegory over most of her fictional creations. The allegorical mode renders the disguised representation of latent thoughts and enables the novelist to sustain the symbolic vein throughout the entire length of the story. Almost all
of McCullers' works fictionalize her life or certain incidents in her life. Reflections in a Golden Eye and The Ballad of the Sad Cafe recreate her stormy married life with Reeves. The triangle relationships in these novels are suggestive of the couple's bisexual inclinations and their intricate sex life. The Member of the Wedding is a leaf plucked out of her own tempestuous adolescence whereas Clock Without Hands calls to mind the novelist's days of infirmity. Apart from these autobiographical elements, her allegories are multi-layered, referring to religious and social issues. Anyhow, the fundamental theme in all of them is that of isolation. As a realistic allegorical writer she effects a harmonious blending of both realistic and allegorical elements in her works.

Being a sensitive writer, McCullers is well aware of the infinite possibilities of symbolic suggestiveness. As in The Member of the Wedding and The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, she often resorts to the technique of developing themes through symbols. Her pen transforms music, moths and twilight into beautiful and telling symbols. A good deal of the symbols are centred around the psychic void and the sense of alienation of the frustrated human beings. The desire to belong and the longing to escape also find symbolic presentation in her works. While the kitchen symbolises the adolescent's sense of confinement,
the cafe, on the other hand, is suggestive of man's desire to belong. 'Wedding' for Frankie and 'room' for Mick are also symbols of belonging. Jail, radio, clock and time are also used as symbols. Music and time are recurring symbols in the first and the last novels.

To augment the symbolic suggestiveness of a situation McCullers adopts many devices other than the use of symbols. She has an artist's eye in selecting the appropriate setting for the action in each of her novels. She has a special liking for the stagnant Southern mill towns which evoke the atmosphere of barrenness, futility and monotony. She often links the physical and psychological weathers as in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe and The Member of the Wedding. Similar is the case of the military base and the forest reserve in Reflections in a Golden Eye. The cafe and kitchen are two other important settings. The image of death completely fills the drug-smelling setting in Clock Without Hands.

The cycle of seasons has a significant role in heightening the emotional appeal of the setting. Frankie's crazy and tumultuous adolescence is associated with the heat and glare of the summer whereas the winter is intimately related to the fantasyworld of the adolescents. It can be observed that in each novel, the inner landscape of the characters is closely linked to the physical setting.
It is generally accepted that McCullers' novels have deep psychological roots. She draws on Freudian and Jungian psychology and makes frequent use of them in novels like *Reflections in a Golden Eye* and *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*. According to Oliver Evans, "Mrs McCullers has always been concerned with exploring what Hawthorne called 'the labyrinth of human heart' and what she has found therein has not always proved cause for rejoicing."\(^3\)

McCullers' characters are mostly repressed individuals whose complex psychic world is unravelled through certain disguised acts. Such psychological symbols throw light on their repressed wishes and latent motives. All defensive devices like repression, regression, projection, reaction formation, fantasy, fixation, identification, denial, displacement and sublimation are disguised representations of repressed wishes or suppressed impulses, intended to rid the ego of unbearable anxiety and tension. Captain Penderton's thrashing of his wife's pet horse and Sherman Pew's hanging of the white man's dog are such disguised representations of their suppressed hatred. Dreams and fantasies are also symbols of wish-fulfilment, enabling the individual to cope with trying situations.
In *Reflections in a Golden Eye* some of the characters represent certain internal psychic factors, their interpersonal conflicts symbolizing internal psychic conflicts. In this symbolic projection of the consciousness, Private Williams represents the id, and Penderton stands for the crippled and neurotic ego. The *Ballad of the Sad Cafe* that orbits mostly around the Jungian theories, projects the masculine protest of a lonely female, and its inevitable consequences. Oscillating between the opposites, Amelia miserably fails to effect an inner reconciliation of the animus and the anima—the masculine and feminine components of the psyche—and her personality meets with disintegration.

The foregoing analysis of Carson McCullers' symbolic fictional works presents her as a lonely hunter who builds up a dark and sombre world which is suffused with the novelist's own stark pessimism. The uniformly sombre nature of her works is the result of a brooding preoccupation with the theme of isolation. A "solitary and midnight haunted" novelist like Hawthorne and Melville, she has caught in fable and with symbol a reflection of America's unquiet mind. Didactic like Tolstoy and richly symbolic like Kafka, she is second to none in her acuity of sensibility and vividness of character portrayal.
Notes

2 Young 153.
3 Evans, *Carson McCullers* 192.
4 Kohler 2-3.