CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Carson McCullers is sometimes depicted as a sensationalist revelling in the grotesque, but she is more than that because "she is first of all the poetic symbolist, a seeker after those luminous meanings which always do transcend the boundaries of the stereotyped, the conventional, and the so-called normal."¹ In the above words Marguerite Young rightly evaluates Carson McCullers, who has grown into a Southern legend by dint of a handful of enigmatic and haunting fictional works. To Tennessee Williams, she is "the greatest living writer of our country, if not of the world."² Though McCullers is so widely acclaimed and has received considerable critical attention, no extensive study has been made on the symbolic structure of her novels as a whole. The present study proposes to concentrate on this scantily explored area of McCullers' fiction, so as to investigate how the novelist makes effective use of the symbolic mode of expression in building up her fictional world.

Before plunging deep into the subject, a word or two must be mentioned about the symbolic mode of expression.
A symbol, as the Greek root 'Symballein' signifies, is a token—a token that may represent an idea, an image, an object or a person. Originally the term meant a portion of an object, like a piece of pottery, broken in two. It was a gesture of hospitality on the part of a host to offer to a guest one of two such fragments as a sign of trust and as a promise of protection in the future from the host's family or tribe, whose members would welcome the outsider at the sight of this 'symbol'.

A symbol is a visible sign for something invisible but it differs from a sign as it suggests not one-to-one mechanical relationship, but a wide range of suggestivity. It is a product of 'wizard frenzy' or of 'unconscious imagination,' as Sigmund Freud puts it. The symbol is an amalgamation of the concrete and the abstract, which comprises both Speech and Silence. According to Goethe, true symbolism is "where the particular represents the more general, not as a dream or a shadow, but as a living momentary revelation of the Inscrutable." Samuel Taylor Coleridge also airs more or less the same view when he opines that a symbol is characterized by "a translucence of the special in the individual, or of the general in the special, or of the universal in the general; above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal." According to
him, the symbol always partakes of the reality which it renders intelligible, and while it enunciates the whole, abides itself as a living part in that unity of which it is the representative.  

Immanuel Kant defines the literary symbol in terms of the 'attributes' of an object "which serve the rational idea as a substitute for logical presentation, but with the proper function of animating the mind by opening out for it a prospect into a field of kindred representations stretching beyond its ken." Romantics like Coleridge or even Yeats have emphasized the impact of the symbol on style. Thoroughly dissatisfied with the passive and mechanical theory of the neoclassicists and drawing inspiration from the early nineteenth century German philosophers, Coleridge formulated the literary principles and aesthetics of symbolism. Yeats indeed goes so far as to maintain that a "continuous indefinable symbolism" is "the substance of all style" and for him the excellence of a symbol consists in the suggestiveness that derives from the suppression of a metaphor's directly apprehensible terms of reference. Ernst Cassirer understands symbolic form to mean "every energy of the mind, . . . through which an intellectual content of meaning is connected to a sensory sign and becomes inwardly a part of it." But
D. H. Lawrence, in his *Selected Literary Criticism* strikes a somewhat different note:

You can't give a great symbol a 'meaning,' anymore than you can give a cat a 'meaning'. Symbols are organic units of consciousness with a life of their own, and you can never explain them away, because their value is dynamic, emotional, belonging to the sense-consciousness of the body and the soul, and not simply mental. 12

As Thomas Carlyle says, in a symbol there is concealment and yet revelation. Therefore, "by Silence and Speech acting together, comes a double significance. And if both the Speech be itself high, and the Silence fit and noble, how expressive will their union be?" 13

Edmund Wilson in his *Axel's Castle* defines symbolism as "an attempt by carefully studied means--a complicated association of ideas represented by a medley of metaphors--to communicate unique personal feelings." 14

The writer is constrained to invent a special language to translate his vibrant feelings. As Wilson says, what is special, fleeting or vague cannot be conveyed by direct statement or description, but only by a succession of words and images which suggest rather than explicitly communicate it to the reader. A symbol, like T. S. Eliot's objective correlative, triggers movements of
feelings and thoughts and it opens the door to infinite associations and connotations. John Ciardi vividly illustrates this point when he compares a symbol to a rock dropped into a pool. It sends out ripples in all directions, and the ripples are in motion. Who can say where the last ripple disappears? Such scope for indefiniteness and infinitude is in fact one of the main reasons behind the common preference for the symbolic mode.

Among the American symbolists, Carson McCullers has great affinity with Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, who, like her, present their themes clothed in the form of fables or parables. To them, a fable with an implicit moral is the best medium to drive home a particular idea or message to the readers. The Scarlet Letter and Moby Dick have a rich parabolic content and rely on an array of symbols to create a sub-structure. Melville is the supreme example of the artistic creator engaged in the art of making new symbols to replace the 'lost' symbols of Protestant Christianity. Likewise, Hawthorne has brought to the American novel an admirable talent for symbolism and a serious interest in psychological truth. McCullers, in her symbolistic concern for meaning and value, adopts more or less the same mode of narrative in her works. Almost all of her
novels can be put under the head of parables—parables of "spiritual isolation." They are parables in the sense that the narrative is so presented as to stress the analogy between the explicit surface meaning and the implicit parabolic meaning which she wants to bring home to the readers.

As her sister Margarita G. Smith has observed, McCullers is essentially a poet and a musician in all the prose she has written. Music is something very close to her heart, and with symbols she creates a sense of indefiniteness as of music. Her genius which is essentially poetic shows a pronounced predilection for symbolism as the medium best suited to her. Margaret McDowell is of opinion that "the symbolical richness of her prose is perhaps the quality that most associates it with poetry." As in poetry, McCullers' symbols arouse strong feelings and deep thoughts. She has a unique facility with symbols which seem to flow spontaneously from her pen, like raindrops from the sky—crystal-clear and natural, reflecting the whole universe in a single drop. Her symbols don't look artificial, contrived or extraneous and they never project out of the texture of the book. They are true symbols, and a true symbol, as Saul Bellow puts it, is "substantial, not accidental. You cannot avoid it, you cannot remove it." To McCullers, symbols are not bits of decoration but organising
principles; they ensure structural cohesion, contribute to the homogeneity of the work, and sometimes affect, as in The Member of the Wedding, the very development of the theme.

While some of McCullers' symbols are explicit and transparent, some others are like seeds buried deep in the soil. In her outline of 'The Mute' she takes care to stress that her themes will not be "stated nakedly":

Much will depend on the insight of the reader and the care with which the book is read. In some parts the underlying ideas will be concealed far down below the surface of a scene and at some other times these ideas will be shown with a certain emphasis.

What McCullers has written of "The Mute" is true of her method in other works as well. The symbolic mode of narration renders her prose richly allusive and remarkably suggestive, and as the novelist herself says, her symbols suggest "the story and theme and incident, and they are so interwoven that one cannot understand consciously where the suggestion begins."

Carson McCullers stands out among her contemporaries as a unique literary artist who has reconciled the rival claims of realism and symbolism. She writes so realistically that her symbolism is not at once
perceptible and is often lost on many of her readers. At the same time, she evinces a tendency to lapse into allegory and tucks away symbolic or parabolic sub-structures beneath the surface statement. This may look paradoxical to an average reader. The skilful balancing of the realistic and allegorical elements compels our admiration and is a distinctive feature of her fictional art. Though her novels are mostly full-length allegories, they operate also on the literal level. Unlike Franz Kafka's allegories, McCullers' novels are highly engrossing stories on the surface level itself, the allegorical substratum giving an additional dimension to our enjoyment of the novels. Hazlitt's comment on Spenser's allegory, namely that it will not meddle with us if we don't meddle with it, is true of McCullers' novels as well. Though generally she is successful as a realistic allegorical writer, there is no gainsaying that there are certain instances of conflict between the allegorical structure and the surface realism. But these instances are few and far between and they amount to nothing when we consider the general excellence of McCullers' use of the symbolic technique.

Catapulted into fame by her maiden venture itself, Carson McCullers burst upon the literary scene at the age of twenty-three. She tried and won critical and popular approbation in various literary genres like the novel, the
short-story and the drama. She even tried her hand at writing verses and published some juvenile verses entitled *Sweet as a Pickle and Clean as a Pig*. McCullers' dramatization of one of her own novels (*The Member of the Wedding*) proved a grand success on the stage. Three of her brilliant novels (*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, *The Members of the Wedding*) have had their film versions.

Weak and sickly by nature, McCullers was constantly troubled by several illnesses and she wrote under severe strain, both physical and emotional. Though she kept on fighting bravely against fate, illness adversely affected her literary output; paralysed and bed-ridden, she took several years to complete her last novel.

*The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* was published in 1940. Readers found it so brilliant, captivating and technically competent that soon she was hilariously compared to Hemingway, Steinbeck and Wolfe. She was considered a greater writer than even Faulkner or Caldwell. The book is a multi-layered allegory with an undercurrent of religious and political symbolism. The insight and imaginative power the work reveals are quite remarkable particularly when we consider that the author was only 23 when she wrote the novel. The novel concerns itself with an insistent search into the personal, political and
social problems encircling the lonely hunters of this world. According to Wilfred Gibson, McCullers' insight into character and the emotional intensity of her writing give her harrowing narrative "the significance of an individual reading of life which is even touched with an indefinable sense of beauty."  

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is centred around a deaf-mute (John Singer) who becomes a magnet for four unfulfilled and spiritually restless people in a Southern town. All the characters, including Singer, turn out to be lonely hunters, longing for love and understanding. The metaphor of the hunter is sustained throughout the novel. Singer, the mute confidant, is presented as an ironic Christ figure who fails to redeem his frustrated disciples. His own life is in the hands of Antonapoulos, the deranged Greek in the asylum, and in the absence of his friend, Singer grows restless and his heart swells with unspoken thoughts. His restlessness, mounting tension and the sense of suffocation are suggested through certain subtle images and symbolic acts, and the novel ends when Singer, out of despair, commits suicide after his friend's death in the asylum. As Dayton Kohler comments, by means of theme, symbol and style "she [McCullers] has thrown some light upon a dark corner of human experience."
In all of McCullers' novels one finds the novelist's obsession with the theme of isolation first introduced in this novel. A specialist in the study of solitude, she concentrates on the theme of loneliness and longing as the inescapable condition of human existence. It is a recurring motif appearing with slight variations but more forcefully in her subsequent works as well. She presents isolation as a social evil engulfing the modern world, where, despite the world having become a global village through the conquest of distance, the distance between human beings is increasing. McCullers is painfully aware of this widening gap and she longs for the harmony of hearts which can be obtained only through unconditional love. In this sense, she is a truly Christian writer, a prophet of unconditional love whose mission it is to build bridges of understanding between human beings and this often gives a palpable moral design to her novels. The language of symbolism comes handy to McCullers in expressing profound truths about human life. The symbols universalise the theme and extend the scope and meaning of her novels beyond the limits of realism.

In McCullers' novels love often goes unrecognised or is mistaken for hate. Love may parole a man who is sentenced to life imprisonment but the tragedy is that he must eventually return to the cell. This and other related themes are effectively presented in the
relationships of various characters in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*.

Another characteristic feature of her fiction foreshadowed in the first novel is the novelist's penchant for the grotesque. She uses the grotesque as a telling symbol of spiritual isolation. The two major characters in the first novel are deaf and dumb, one of them an obese, gluttonous lunatic. The two dummies trapped among articulate men symbolise the universal predicament of isolation.

*Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), a macabre and weird tale, evoked mixed response from the public. Barely enjoyable as a realistic narrative, it is meant to be read as a full-length allegory. The homosexual sado-masochist and the animal-like young primitive are all intended as symbols of the piercing sense of isolation. Besides being an allegory on loneliness and on the futility of escape, it is also a portrayal of evil in a Southern military base which is a playground of all evils ranging from sexual aberrations to violence and murder. The moral chaos pictured in the novel is the natural outcome of moral agnosticism. This community devoid of the essential psycho-religious bond is in fact a symbol of everything that is grotesque and terrifying in the American soil.
It needs hardly to be said that McCullers is at her best in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1943). It is a highly successful allegory depicting the rebounding effect of the rejection of femininity; the consequent isolation is traced in the female giantess Amelia, her husband Marvin Macy and in the dwarfish Lymon—all grotesque portraits, representing inner isolation. According to Joseph Millichap, the geometrically patterned relationship of these characters is the basis of the symbolism and structure of the novel. The philosophy ingrained in the work is that some people are drawn to those who cannot love them and that unwanted love can arouse not pity but resentment and malice. Towards the beginning of the story, the novelist briefly states her theory of love. According to McCullers, one can never be a lover and the beloved simultaneously. The beloved fears and hates the lover and so McCullers' characters are denied the release through love. To her, "the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself." Thus, even the most outlandish people or "a most mediocre person can be the object of a love which is wild, extravagant and beautiful as the poison lilies of the swamp" (24). All her novels basically concern themselves with the theory of love, not openly but obliquely through a parabolic substratum of concealed meaning.
Intensely autobiographical, many of her works afford intimate glimpses into the novelist's own soulscape. *Reflections in a Golden Eye* and *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* are, for instance, autobiographical to the core and are based on the author's own youthful experiences. They throw light on the dark, unlit corners of her life with Reeves McCullers. Sexually polymorphous, both of them had found themselves entangled in complicated love affairs which involved triangular and extramarital relationships and these novels allegorise the complex and intricate sex life of the author. In the 'Personal Preface' to the published version of her play *The Square Root of Wonderful* she writes:

Why does anyone write at all? I suppose a writer writes out of some inward compulsion to transform his own experience (much of it is unconscious) into the universal and symbolical. The themes the artist chooses are always deeply personal. I suppose my central theme is the theme of spiritual isolation.\(^{30}\)

Most of her fictional writing has a factual basis on the happenings in her own life. Herself a 'lonely hunter,' she identifies herself with the lonely hunters of her fictional universe. This is the secret of her success as
a portrayer of tortured and thwarted lovers. In "The Flowering Dream" she says:

I become the characters I write about. I am so immersed in them that their motives are my own. When I write about a thief, I become one; when I write about Captain Penderton, I become a homosexual man; when I write about a deaf-mute, I become dumb during the time of the story. I become characters I write about and I bless the Latin poet Terence who said, "Nothing human is alien to me." 

The agony of adolescence is memorably presented in the haunting story of Frankie Addams in The Member of the Wedding (1946). It is the most poetic of all her works and is noted for the superb harmony between the theme and the language used to express it. The setting is highly evocative of the adolescents' feelings of monotony and boredom. The heat and glare of the crazy summer are symbolic of the hot, crazy days of Frankie's adolescence. It is to escape the dullness of her mundane life that she wants to become a member of her brother's wedding. Her longing to identify herself with the couple is symbolic of every man's compulsion to belong and her disillusionment represents the plight of the frustrated humanity. Thus Frankie is a dual symbol, representing the adolescent and every man. Symbol and psychology merge well in her
character. Since she is a replica of the novelist herself, the story can be viewed as "a parable on the life of a writer in the South, the alienation and withdrawal the sensitive Southerner must feel."32

Some of McCullers' contemporaries may be stylistically superior to her, but none of them possesses the depth of insight into character that McCullers has brought to bear upon her fiction. Her characters are impressive despite their grotesqueness and we see them in situations where their grotesqueness becomes symbolic of some kink or mental twist. A part and parcel metaphoricalness which turns character into symbol is made use of as a narrative technique. For example, when we go through A Christmas Carol as a simple realistic narrative, the characters may seem crude outlines but if we read it as a parable about the horrors of the shrivelled heart and the process of rehumanizing, the story acquires depth and amplitude. An analysis of the pattern of symbolism in Carson McCullers reveals that characters themselves constitute the lion's share of her symbols. The grotesque, the adolescent and the Negro characters are pressed into service to represent the human predicament of isolation. The grotesque characters are estranged from the world by their own oddities. The Negroes are alienated by their black identity whereas the adolescent, not sure even about their sexual identity, wander among
children and adults, desperately longing to belong. Mick and Frankie exemplify the metaphorical use of the alienated adolescent. They flee from life to the realm of snow-capped fantasies and dreams.

McCullers' last novel is about universal man who is measuring out the time of his livingness as by 'a clock without hands'. 33 Clock Without Hands (1961) is yet another parable on loneliness and it tells the story of the slowly dying cancer patient J. T. Malone. The richly allusive title points to the protagonist's predicament of having been caught between life and death. He is like a man looking at a clock without hands. Malone stands for the existential everyman caught in an alien universe and living in the shadow of death, endeavouring to find out some meaning in life. Having realized the self in the end, Malone peacefully bids farewell to the world.

The Square Root of Wonderful (1958), which is densely autobiographical, is a play about marriage and divorce in which McCullers recreates her own family relationships. Phillip Lovejoy, the death-oriented character, closely resembles the novelist's husband Reeves McCullers. Both of them put an end to their problems by courting death.

Any examination of McCullers' use of symbolism has to take into account besides her novels, the short-stories
and poems as well. The themes and techniques in the short-stories are the same as those in her fiction. Of her nineteen published short-stories, more than six deal with the problems of adolescents and children. A few concentrate on the evils of alcoholism and allied domestic issues. The chief difference between her short-stories and novels is that the characters in the short-stories are comparatively much less grotesque than those in her novels. It does not mean they are less isolated. Though physically normal, they are psychic freaks, suffering from spiritual loneliness, victims of disaffection and broken relationships. The Tramp in "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud" is heart-broken after parting from his wife and he "escapes the fate of death-in-life by acquiring the ability to love through a systematic process of self-training." 34

The disoriented adolescents in the short-stories are mostly abandoned and isolated. Orphaned by invalidism, Constance in "Breath from the Sky" is alienated among blood relations. Henrietta Evans in "Correspondence" is frustrated by the lack of response from her South American pen-pal and she withdraws from the world and turns cynical.

McCullers' poems, too, not infrequently, make use of the symbolic mode, though it cannot be argued that her use of symbolism is anything more than tentative or incidental.
in most of them. Her juvenile verses are forgettable pieces which haven't caught public attention, but some of her poems of the forties and fifties, like "The Twisted Trinity" are quite outstanding. "The Twisted Trinity" symbolically suggests the change of perception effected by love. Before the onset of love, the poet is spiritually integrated, the self having established a wholesome relationship with Nature and God:

There was a time when stone was stone.
When a face on the street was a finished face
And a leaf, my soul, and God alone
Made instant symmetry.
Now all things fail, the trinity is twisted. 35

Poems in The Mortgaged Heart, like "Incantations to Lucifer," "Hymen, O, Hymen," and "The Dual Angel" treat of religious and philosophical themes. In "Hymen, O, Hymen," the poet traces man's origin to the union of God and Lucifer, thereby accounting symbolically for the divine and the devilish aspects of human nature. "Love and the Rind of Time" proclaims man's superiority. "The Dual Angel," composed shortly after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, teems with metaphors relating to contemporary military strategy. There are horrifying images like "The screams are heard by blasted ears within the radiation zone / And hanging eyes upon a cheek must see the charred and iridescent craze." 36
The symbolic suggestiveness of McCullers' novels is considerably enhanced by the use of appropriate backdrops by way of temporal and local setting. She uses stagnant Southern mill towns as the backdrop of most of her novels. The abysmally depressing settings create an atmosphere of futility and reinforce the sense of barrenness which is the hallmark of her fiction. The cafe in The Ballad of the Sad Cafe and the kitchen in The Member of the Wedding are of symbolic significance, representing as they do the microcosm of the macrocosm. Frankie's suffocation in the kitchen world is symbolic of the limitation the novelist herself might have experienced as a writer in the South. Music, snow, time, the cycle of seasons, etc. are some of the recurrent symbols appearing in McCullers' fiction.

No less worth-mentioning is the psychological import of McCullers' fictional works. The novelist skilfully employs Freudian and other psychological symbols in portraying the mysterious and ambiguous working of the minds of her odd characters. Symbolism integrates the particular, restricted life of the Conscious Ego with grand, unconscious dreams and the symbols function as a means of releasing sources of energy from the Unconscious. McCullers often makes a symbolic projection of the consciousness in her novels like Reflection in a Golden Eye and The Ballad of the Sad Cafe. In psychoanalysis symbolism is the psychological process involved in
disguised or repressed wishes and experiences. In this light, psychological symbols are the disguised representations of repressed wishes or impulses. Such disguised acts and gestures throw light on the dark or dim-lit areas of the psyche.

In *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, the characters represent some internal psychic factors. Private Williams, the primitive creature of instincts with an ill-developed conscience, represents the id, one of the three systems of the personality. The neurotic Captain, who resorts to a series of defense mechanisms to cover up his deeply buried repressions and anxieties, stands for the crippled ego. In *Firebird*, the uncontrollably violent horse, we find a projection of the repressed sexual energy devastating the lives of the characters.

In *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, which draws heavily upon Jungian theories, McCullers touchingly portrays the disintegration of a masculine female's personality. Amelia fails to bring into union the different forces of the psyche and the psychic balance is upset. Amelia's tragedy represents her inability to achieve the harmonious wholeness of personality, balancing the Animus and Anima—the masculine and feminine archetypes—in proportion.
McCullers is one of those few writers who use the dialogue with a symbolic purpose. In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, the main characters are deaf-mutes. It is no exaggeration to say that the song of silence is audible in this work of art. In spite of being a dummy, Singer is loved and admired by all around him. But the most articulate characters like Copeland and Blount are the least understood. Speech only alienates them from others. Their message is missed in a 'cataract of words'. The use of dialogue is kept bare minimum in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* and *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*. The absence of dialogue is suggestive of the lack of communication and love which is the crux of the problem.

In spite of being one of the leading novelists of the South, McCullers has not left any aesthetic theory behind her. As she herself says, the ingenuities of aesthetics have never been her problem. "Flight, in itself, interests me and I am indifferent to salting the bird's tail."37 Here is a sort of inspirational writing, counting on the moments of illumination from time to time. She is highly original in the sense that she relies on the treasures of the unconscious for the symbols and images. To her, "writing is a wandering, dreaming occupation. The intellect is submerged beneath the unconscious--the thinking mind is best controlled by the imagination."38
Her characters are mostly her own imaginative creations. As Oliver Evans remarks, writers like McCullers "seem, like Minerva, to have sprung full-blown from the forehead of Jupiter."39

The above review of McCullers' works which use symbolistic techniques of various sorts, and their characteristics serves only an introductory purpose. The second and third chapters are concerned with her use of characters--grotesque, adolescent and black characters--as metaphors or symbols. McCullers introduces these three sets of characters as potent symbols of the predicament of inner isolation and eternal loneliness. Grotesqueness, either physical or mental, leads to unbearable alienation from the society. Similar is the case of the adolescents and Negroes. The adolescents who fail to fit themselves to the community of the adults or children, and the Negroes ostracized by the Whites are subject to extreme isolation and serve as apt symbols of that soul-state. Chapter IV, which deals with the use of the allegorical mode, analyses the veiled allegory in each of her novels. They are multi-layered allegories having autobiographical, political, social and religious levels of meaning. Chapter V concentrates on the recurrent symbols and symbolistic techniques such as the use of dreams, numbers, omens, symbolic gestures, etc. Chapter VI dwells
on the symbolic settings that enhance the suggestiveness of her works. McCullers is keen on selecting the most evocative backdrop for the action in her novels. The use of psychological symbols is traced in the seventh chapter where an attempt is made to single out those instances in which the novelist experiments with her knowledge of human psychology and applies it effectively in bringing out the dark and mysterious aspects of human nature. Chapter VII recapitulates the main arguments and locates the position of McCullers in the galaxy of Southern writers.
Notes


8 Coleridge 388.


10 A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms 188.


17 To present her ideas effectively, McCullers makes use of various modes of narratives such as symbolism, allegories and parables. To her, a symbol is a word or a set of words that signifies an object or event which itself signifies something else. While infinite meanings can be ascribed to a symbol, there is always an exact one to one relationship between the surface narrative and the underlying sub-structure of the allegory. Allegory, from McCullers' point of view, can be defined as a narrative in which the character, action, and the scenery signify a second correlated order of persons, things or events in addition to the primary level. Her novels are also
parables in the sense that they are short narratives presented so as to stress the implied analogy between its component parts and the lesson that the narrator is trying to convey to us.


22 *The Mortgaged Heart* 124.


27 Carson McCullers uses the grotesque to portray an alienated and tragic world. Her characters are grotesque in the sense that they evince physical or psychological abnormalities and distortions, which, in turn, make them symbols of terrible isolation.

Carson McCullers, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe and Other Stories (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1951) 25. All subsequent references to The Ballad of the Sad Cafe are to this edition.


34 Oliver Evans, Carson McCullers: Her Life and Work (London: Peter Owen Ltd., 1965) 90.

35 Decision II (Nov. 1941): 30.

36 The Mortgaged Heart 292.

37 "The Vision Shared," The Mortgaged Heart 262.

38 "The Flowering Dream," The Mortgaged Heart 276.