VI
CONCLUSION

Carson McCullers had the brilliant and early success that has come to be almost a tradition of the Southern school. The themes with which she was mainly considered are the spiritual isolation of the individual and the individual's desire to free himself or herself from this condition. Writing at the beginning of the War, immersed in the social and economic inequities of the South, McCullers envisions neither social change nor social protection. Rather, as Eisinger points out, her "maimed half-people hope to make themselves whole by entering into a fructifying human relationship. She understands the need of an individual to define himself by something outside himself." \(^1\)

McCullers' first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, develops the theme of the loss of love and the attempt of the self to identify with

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\(^1\) Chester Eisinger, *Fiction of the Forties*, p. 224.
other selves. The novel portrays the essential loneliness of individuals. Singer is the center of attraction and becomes what each of the others makes of him. Mick Kelly wishes to establish a rapport with persons outside herself. Doctor Copeland, the Negro doctor, is bitter and hopeful by turns and is critical of the white world he is forced to live in. Jake Blount, in his desire for companionship, is given to Marxist denunciatory speeches. Biff Brannon owns the cafe in which they try to communicate with each other. In other words, Mick is caught between childhood and adulthood; Doctor Copeland is caught between two races; Jake Blount is caught between two classes; and Biff Brannon is caught between two sexes. McCullers' selection of a cripple is a part of her practice; _The Ballad of the Sad Café_ has a hunchback, Cousin Lymon. That the cripple in this novel is a deaf-mute and therefore unable to communicate with the others is even more to the purpose. It is even more significant that Singer should concentrate his interest in another deaf-mute, Antonapoulos, and thus remove himself further from the normal
world. Though Singer, unlike his crazy friend, attracts the admiring interest of the people around him who attribute strength and self-sufficiency to his silence, he himself is more vulnerable than any of them, and when Antonapoulos dies he can only commit suicide. His strength has been nothing but his love for a half-wit locked up in an asylum. This theme is more fully explored in The Ballad of the Sad Café.

In The Ballad of the Sad Café, the setting is a dreary Southern mill town, boring, dull, and lonely. It is the story of Miss Amelia Evans, an amazon who sells feed, guano, and domestic staples:

She was a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead, and there was about her sunburned face a tense, haggard quality. She might have been a handsome woman if, even then, she was not slightly cross-eyed.²

By reducing her appearance to a series of conflicting angles, by emphasizing her physical defects and her masculinity — her face is described as "sexless and white" (3) — McCullers transforms Amelia into a freak.

Amelia is an uncompromising merchant with a passion for vindictive lawsuits and a beneficent witch doctor with a genuine desire to ease human pain. She is described at the beginning as living alone in a large house, all but one of the windows boarded up. Her face is "like the terrible dim faces known in dreams — sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief" (3-4).

The story is about her past with an explanation of why Amelia Evans had eventually come to that window. Cousin Lymon, a dwarf hunchback, is responsible for the change in her life:

He was scarcely more than four feet tall and he wore a ragged, dusty coat that reached only to his knees. His crooked little legs seemed too thin to carry the weight of his great
warped chest and the hump that sat on his shoulders. He had a very large head, with deep-set blue eyes and a sharp little mouth. His face was both soft and sassy—at the moment his pale skin was yellowed by dust and there were lavender shadows beneath his eyes. He carried a lopsided old suitcase which was tied with a rope. (6-7)

Under the hunchback's influence Amelia changes all her habits, and the general store becomes a café. She changes from a bored person to a pleasant and happy person. Their relationship not only changes Amelia but transforms Lymon as well. As Amelia, the lover, becomes softened, graceful, and communicative, Lymon, the beloved, becomes proud and aristocratic.

Amelia had married Marvin Macy, a beautiful crook, but kicked him out of the house when he tried to make love to her. Macy's return from the penitentiary forebodes misfortune and an end to her love for Lymon:
The first person in the town to see this newcomer was Cousin Lymon, who had heard the shifting gears and come around to investigate. The hunchback stuck his head around the corner of the porch, but did not step out altogether into full view. He and the man stared at each other, and it was not the look of two strangers meeting for the first time and swiftly summing up each other. It was a peculiar stare they exchanged between them, like the look of two criminals who recognize each other. (47)

Lymon completes the eccentric love-triangle by falling desperately in love with Macy. It is now Amelia's turn to suffer at the hands of the beloved. While Lymon slavishly follows Macy about town, Amelia becomes increasingly distraught at the change in his affections. But she can't do anything. When Lymon announces that Macy will move in with them, Amelia mournfully recognizes that "Once you have lived with another, it is a great torture to have to live alone ... it is better to take in your mortal enemy than face the terror of living alone"(60).
Knowing his power over Amelia, Lymon mocks her, imitates her walk, and humiliates her, but she accepts him because she cannot bear his absence. Finally, in the climactic act, Amelia throws herself upon Macy, furiously embittered over what he has twice done to her. The two pound each other with bone-cracking blows. After half an hour, when Amelia puts her triumphant hands to the throat of her fallen adversary, Lymon, with astonishing swiftness, flies at her back, pulls her off, and gives the victory to Macy. That night Lymon and Macy celebrate their victory by smashing up Amelia's property, and disappear. Amelia never recovers from the shock:

Miss Amelia let her hair grow ragged, and it was turning grey. Her face lengthened, and the great muscles of her body shrank until she was thin as old maids are thin when they go crazy. And those grey eyes — slowly day by day they were more crossed, and it was as though they sought each other out to exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition. (70)
The town returns to its desolate, mechanical ways: "Yes, the town is dreary" (70). Waiting for Lymon's return, Amelia lets the café and her healing practice fall into ruin, and she eventually becomes a recluse:

For three years she sat out on the front steps every night, alone and silent, looking down the road and waiting. But the hunchback never returned.... It was in the fourth year that Miss Amelia hired a Cheehaw carpenter and had him board up the premises, and there in those closed rooms she has remained ever since. (70)

Thus Amelia lives in utter loneliness: "The soul rots with boredom" (71).

The pathetic sequence of events in this novella sums up the theme of loneliness in McCullers' novels. As John Vickary says, the major feeling that is explored is that of lost communication: "the feeling of being trapped within one's own identity and unable to form a meaningful relationship with others leads to the idea of uniqueness and ultimately to freakishness."3 The Ballad of the Sad Café is the simplest and at the same time the

most powerful expression of this feeling of being trapped. Vickary explains the tortured relationships of the three "lovers" in the following manner:

The archetypal pattern of love is presented in its clearest and simplest form in The Ballad of the Sad Café. For each of the three main characters is successively lover and beloved. Each, then, is in turn a slave and a tyrant, depending on whether he is loving or being loved. The refusal or inability of the characters to synchronize their changes of heart produces the interlocking romantic triangle which constitute the plot, while the grotesque comedy arises out of their each in turn conforming to a role they contemptuously rejected in another. 4

The Ballad of the Sad Café is about the search for human companionship by three lonely humans. The three seekers are incomplete within themselves. Rather than giving up what they have,

they seek in others what they feel they lack and call it love. None of the three gets what he or she wants. All the three are thwarted and, in the process, made to look utterly grotesque. Thus the love/hate triangle of Amelia, Lymon, and Macy is also a triangle of the shattered personality. As McCullers herself says in "The Flowering Dream,"

> The passionate, individual love — the old Tristan — Isolde love, the Eros love — is inferior to the love of God, to fellowship, to the love of Agape — the Greek god of the feast, the God of brotherly love — and of man. This is what I tried to show in The Ballad of the Sad Café in the strange love of Miss Amelia for the little hunchback, Cousin Lymon.  

In her second novel, Reflections in a Golden Eye, also Carson McCullers develops the theme of isolation and the resultant boredom. The novel begins as follows:

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5. The Mortgaged Heart, p. 281.
An army post in peacetime is a dull place. Things happen, but then they happen over and over again. The general plan of a fort in itself adds to the monotony — the huge concrete barracks, the neat rows of officers' homes built one precisely like the other, the gym, the chapel, the golf course and the swimming pools — all is designed according to a certain rigid pattern. (1)

The contrast between man in civilization and man in nature is basic in the novel. The small world of the army post is perched against an undeveloped countryside. Nature surrounds the camp and enters it through Firebird, through Private Williams, and through Leonora. But nature in McCullers' fiction is associated with the lunatic and the criminal. Though Private Williams enjoys himself in natural surroundings, we know that he has murdered a man. Alison, pathetically jealous and alone, Anacleto, her Filipino houseboy, Major Langdon, causing pain to others in selfishness that he only sentimentally regrets, and Captain Penderton with his frustration, are all in constant conflict with the natural forces outside and inside themselves.
The theme that McCullers develops is the contrast between the rigid discipline and monotony of the military establishment as opposed to the uncontrollable natural universe and to the permissive and egocentric behaviour of the people in the army post. The deadly monotony generates neurosis and produces violence. Captain Penderton is cuckolded by his wife Leonora, who has an affair with Major Langdon; Anacleto is devoted to the Major's wife, Alison; and Captain Penderton has homosexual feelings about Private Williams. These complex human and inhuman relationships lead to several acts of violence, culminating in the murder of Private Williams.

The popular success of *The Member of the Wedding* established McCullers as a novelist of repute. In this novel Frankie is the "I" person who tries to find a rapport with a "We" group — her brother and her prospective sister-in-law — but fails in her attempt. Frankie cannot find relief beyond the hot kitchen. For her the outside atmosphere is stifling. McCullers uses heat to suggest boredom and restriction, and cold to suggest
liberation. Frankie dreams of snow and ice, but her environment is deadening heat. When Frankie tries to communicate her feeling of being trapped to Berenice, Berenice says,

"We all of us somehow caught. We born this way or that way and we don't know why. But we caught anyhow. I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And maybe we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught...." (113)

Berenice here is describing people being "caught" in their own individual identity and being ultimately isolated. The above passage reminds us of "every man's 'caught' condition of spiritual isolation and sense of aloneness" that Virginia Spencer Carr speaks of. When Frankie is spotted by the police while trying to run away from home, she realizes that "Between herself and all the places there was a space like an enormous canyon she could not hope to bridge or cross" (148).

It has been pointed out that *The Member of the Wedding* is less a novel of initiation into acceptance of human limits than a novel of initiation into acceptance of female limits. Frankie's desire to be a soldier or a pilot could be fulfilled by a boy; these goals are defined as unacceptable for girls. Frankie's ambition to travel and gain experience in the world is not unattainable for a boy.

At the end of the novel, Frankie has grown a year. She has relinquished the hope of joining her brother. John Henry is dead and Berenice has left to be remarried. But she is now grown up in the sense of being able to tolerate disappointment, and she has found another "we," her new friend Mary Littlejohn.

If in all her other novels McCullers is concerned more with the loneliness that results from a lack of rapport with other individuals, in *Clock Without Hands*, as mentioned earlier, she is concerned more with loneliness that results from a lack of rapport with the self. When one feels lonely, time passes with maddening slowness. Malone, while awaiting his death complains of a "zone of loneliness" (12). The
summer seems unending to Jester, in his grandfather's big house. Sherman, in spite of the job Judge Clane has given him, is horribly bored and haunted by a feeling that he must do something. Even Judge Clane is lonely, not because he lacks identity but because his capacity for love died when his wife, whom he loved sincerely, died.

Thus failure of the individual's "intense desire and effort to relate to others" and sometimes to himself or herself, leading to an increased spiritual isolation, is the theme that Carson McCullers develops in her fiction.

In conclusion, we can say that Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, and Flannery O'Connor form a triad that has contributed substantially to modern Southern fiction. These three and Katherine Anne Porter have carried on and modified the basic Faulknerian themes of lust, disease, mutilation, defeat, idiocy, and death. They testify to a remarkable conjunction of feminine sensibilities in modern American literature.