I
INTRODUCTION

Carson McCullers (1917-1967) is one of the most controversial American writers of this century. The controversy began with the publication of her first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, and continued till her last novel, *Clock Without Hands*. If we review the controversy, we find that the censure has come from professional book reviewers while the praise has come either from other writers or from "academic" critics, which makes us consider her a "writer's writer."

Lula Carson Smith was born in Columbus, Georgia, in 1917 of a family that was poorly off, but which sympathized with her early passion for music and writing. "Deeply compassionate, the youngster was becoming increasingly aware that one's physical aberration was but an exaggerated symbol of what she considered everyman's 'caught' condition of spiritual isolation and sense of aloneness in spite of his intense desire and effort to relate to others."¹

She had started writing about lonely people by the time she was seventeen. Her first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, was published in 1940 when she was just twenty-two. She was considered the publisher's find of the decade. Within the next ten years the young novelist wrote two more novels, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946), and converted *The Member of the Wedding* into a successful prize-winning Broadway play. Her fourth novel, *Clock Without Hands* (1961), was published six years before her death. Virginia Spencer Carr says that "through it (*Clock Without Hands*) all the motif of loneliness, isolation, and estrangement coursed unbroken, just as it underscored myriad facets of her personal life. To Carson, as to her fictional friends — and they were her friends — reciprocity in a love relationship seemed impossible. One could never be both lover and beloved at the same time. Some of her people never dared to assume either role, or to attempt an exchange." She also has a novella, *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1936), to her credit.

The maternal influence was great in Carson McCullers' life. It can be described as overwhelming. Her father Lamar Smith was a shy man who let his flamboyant wife prevail in the household. Carson was the first of three children and remained the favourite whom her mother, Marguerite Smith, declared a genius and groomed for greatness. Her mother was relentlessly effusive about her talents. Her brother, Lamar, Jr., said, "Not only were we proud that Lula Carson had proved herself a genius in her writings, but we also believed that our mother was almost one herself for recognizing it in our sister and helping bring it to fruition. Our mother lived for Lula Carson, and Lula Carson could not have been what she was without her."3 Carson McCullers remained dependent on her mother into adulthood. The fact that she never presented a happy, secure mother - daughter relationship in her fiction is explained by her brother as inability to deal with such a strong figure. His conclusion was that Carson had been "so utterly dependent upon mother throughout her lifetime that she would not have dared strip herself

that bare in her writing." Thus, nurtured by a strongly maternal family, McCullers grew to maturity in a quiet Southern town, receiving the standard conservative education that the region offered.

Carson McCullers was not conventionally pretty. She struck tomboy poses in childhood photographs. During her school days she used to wear knickers or dresses that were too long, cut her hair in unfashionable shapes, and smoke cigarettes. "McCullers' adult preference for slacks and men's shirts became a trademark when she established her literary persona after the publication of The Heart is a Lonely Hunter."  

Even as a very small child McCullers experienced an ambivalence that possessed her the rest of her life. She yearned to belong to a group, yet she retained a sense of her own separateness and the


need to feel and remain unique. Many years later she wrote:

To the spectator, the amateur philosopher, no motive among the complex ricochets of our desires and rejections seems stronger or more enduring than the will of the individual to claim his identity and belong. From infancy to death, the human being is obsessed by these dual motives.... After the first establishment of identity there comes the imperative need to lose this new-found sense of separateness and to belong to something larger and more powerful than the weak, lonely self. The sense of moral isolation is intolerable to us. 6

In The Member of the Wedding, Frankie Addams articulates this universal need: "Yesterday, and all the twelve years of her life, she had only been Frankie. She was an I person who had to walk around and do things by herself. All other people had a we to claim, all other except her." 7 Also, McCullers


reasoned that if she were "a member," she could have whatever degree of anonymity she wished. It is similarly that her protagonist Frankie reasons in *The Member of the Wedding*:

> It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member. She belonged to no club and was a member of nothing in the world. Frankie had become an unjoined person who hung around in doorways, and she was afraid. (1)

Carson McCullers dropped "Lula" from her name at the age of fifteen. She wanted to leave the narrow world of Georgia by seeking a career in the North. But she did not leave home immediately after completing her high-school studies at sixteen. She lived with her family for another year, and continued her piano work and read what she considered great literature. She describes the impact Dostoevsky had upon her as follows:

> The books of Dostoevski — *The Brothers Karamazov*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *The Idiot* — opened the door to an
Immense and marvelous new world. For years I had seen these books on the shelves of the public library, but on examining them I had been so put off by the indigestible names and the small print. So when at last I read Dostoevski it was a shock that I shall never forget—and the same amazement takes hold of me whenever I read these books today, a sense of wonder that cannot be jaded by familiarity.

She expresses a similar enthusiasm for Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Turgenev. She also acknowledges her indebtedness to "the Russian realists." She says that the Russians are masters of the vivid and "outwardly callous juxtaposition of the tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of a man with a materialistic detail." She was also drawn to the writings of D.H. Lawrence, James Joyce, Gustave Flaubert, The Bronte Sisters, Katherine Mansfield,


It was at the age of seventeen that Carson McCullers left Columbus for New York. In the new atmosphere of the North, she immersed herself in wider intellectual traditions than she could have found in Georgia. Illness forced her to return to Columbus in the Autumn of 1936. She married Reeves McCullers in September 1937 and two years later left the South for good.

Literary recognition came early for McCullers. When her first novel, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, was published, reviewers applauded her as the literary discovery of the year. The Member of the Wedding and The Ballad of a Sade Café represent the art of Carson McCullers as its finest. Although reviewers were not very generous to Reflections in a Golden Eye and


Clock Without Hands, the effect of the former has been described as a unique aesthetic experience, and the latter is considered a memorable book. If fame and achievement came early to the young writer, so also did personal stress, which deepened into tragedy. She divorced Reeves when she was twenty-four. They remarried in 1945. After eight years, when Carson was planning a second divorce, Reeves killed himself in France. His frustrated writing ambitions, his debilitating alcholism and Carson's own heavy drinking, as well as her illness, eventual invalidism, and paralysis, all contributed to the complications, suffering, and turbulence of their lives. Her ill-fated yet inspiriting marriage opened up a new world of experience for Carson McCullers, and the complexities of her marital situation are reflected in various ways in her fiction. Even with her illness, McCullers achieved remarkable success between the ages of twenty-three and thirty. Her sufferings became a part of her work. In her last novel, Clock Without Hands, the protagonist J.T.Malone, faces death for a year after coming to know that he has leukemia. McCullers
describes his experience with the validity only
author who has adjusted to suffering, disability,
and early death could achieve. On 15 August, 1967
she suffered a final stroke, a massive brain haemo-
rrhage, and died on 29 September.

An assessment of contemporary creative
writing ought to be a fusion of the claims of art
and the claims of relevance. A study of the sense
of isolation experienced by the protagonists in
the novels of Carson McCullers seems to be a prag-
matic critical approach, because it helps us explore
the themes of her novels. This approach is based
on Robert Nisbet's view that "At the center of any
given style lies what can only be called a theme,
or a cluster of themes. Theme carries with it a
more active, passive, and dynamic character than
does the word style. Implicit in any theme is at
once a question being answered, more or less, and
also an ordering of experience and observation in
a special focus." 12

12. Robert Nisbet, Sociology as an Art Form (New York :