III

A HUMAN HELL: REFLECTIONS IN A GOLDEN EYE

In Reflections in a Golden Eye, McCullers presents a world where the suffering imposed by isolation is unrelieved by the possibility of human idealism and individual struggle. The title McCullers intended was Army Post but she retitled it Reflections in a Golden Eye. She produced this novel in about two months immediately after she completed The Heart is a Lonely Hunter. Critics who reviewed the novel noted the great differences between McCullers' first two novels. They discovered the remarkable tautness of McCullers organization, the allegorical implications in the obsessive behaviour of the characters, the impressive vision of evil that overshadows the work, and the macabre comedy that flashes through it.

Reflections in a Golden Eye is considered the least subjective of McCullers' novels. Flaubert and Faulkner seem to have influenced her in writing this novel. Her reading of Flaubert's Madame Bovary
seems to have contributed to the objectivity with which the story is told the economy and brilliance of style, the swiftness of the action, and the inevitability of the tragic outcome. Faulkner's Sanctuary gave her knowledge about voyeurism, which plays an important role in Reflections in a Golden Eye. It is possible that McCullers had Lawrence's famous story "The Prussian Officer" in the back of her mind when she plotted her novel. Reeves, her husband, related to her an actual incident at Fort Bragg which involved a Peeping Tom. She came to know more about life in an army post, at least superficially, through her visits to the Tuckers, Mrs. Tucker being her piano teacher. In addition, Reeves himself, since he had lived in an army camp once, was also helpful in providing her with some details regarding an army post. All these make her description of the army post life-like and authentic.

This setting is important because the monotony of army life during times of peace encourages the neuroses of the various characters at the same time that it allows them the leisure in which to express them.
As Tennessee Williams has pointed out, "Reflections in a Golden Eye is one of the purest and most powerful of those works which are conceived in that Sense of The Awful which is the desperate black root of nearly all significant modern art..."¹ To evoke this "Sense of The Awful," McCullers has substituted the impersonality of an army post for the varieties of a southern Main Street. She has transformed human oddity from a mark of the individual personality into a sign of general human perversion. Reflections in a Golden Eye is a violent drama about people so mired in their deviancy and so bereft of all humour and hope as to be behind redemption as valuable, living personalities. Caught in their dreary routine and driven by compulsions they do not understand, they appear to us more as a shadows than people.

The story takes place in a southern army post during peace time. It is a dull place. Any unusual event attracts attention and the place is

not only dull but repressive. The layout of the army post reflects its mechanical, inhuman spirit: "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). It is an environment where every man "is expected only to follow the heels ahead of him" (2), and all human expression has the stamp of a general impersonality. Sexual relations become remote and impersonal; they become the blind reactions of brute instinct rather than expressions of individual human love.

There are six main characters in the novel: Private Williams, Captain Penderton, Leonora Penderton, Major Langdon, Alison Langdon, and Anacleto. The novelist explores, through the behaviour of these six characters, the violent, unusual, and unpredictable aspects of human behaviour, which the uniformity imposed by a military existence can almost obscure. In this novel McCullers depicts the cowardice, indulgence, perversion, cruelty, and self-hatred which we can associate with explicit portrayals of
the seven deadly sins in medieval art. In fact the novel has been called a modern morality play. The principal theme of the novel as McCullers herself suggests in the first pages 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 who live in the army camp. Eisinger makes an interesting comment concerning the polarization of the six characters:

They divide evenly into two groups. One is made up of Leonora Penderton, Major Morris Langdon, and Ellgee Williams. These people live in nature, enjoying (in the literal sense) life at the creature level. They illustrate the principle of healthy animality. For the first two especially the appetitive life — food, drink, sex, and sport, all of them equally attractive — is all-encompassing. They are insensitive and unintelligent. They are incapable of asking any questions about life. The other group is made up of Captain Weldon Penderton, Alison Langdon, and Anacleto, a Filipino houseboy. These people are cut off entirely from the world of nature. They represent
the sensitive feminine principle of culture, that is, the cultivation of mind and the arts. They are full of self-doubts and adept at self-torture. The two groups, even though they are moored to their separate spheres of being, destroy each other. No one succeeds in making himself whole, in borrowing from the other group what is lacking in his own personality.2

The first section of the novel introduces the emotionless Private Ellgee Williams. He is a country youth who loves sunshine, plants and animals. It is he who precipitates the tragedy. He is a man of instinct and impulse rather than of reason. He loves horses, but remains remote from people with whom he works, eats and sleeps: "He was a silent young soldier and in the barracks he had neither an enemy nor a friend" (2). Because of his understanding of horses he is ideally suited for his job as stable boy. The animalism of his nature is mentioned in a number of times in the novel: "In his eyes, which were a curious blend of amber and

brown, there was a mute expression that is found usually in the eyes of animals" (2). His affinity with horses seems a little odd and there is something a little unnatural about the relationship he maintains with the animals he looks after:

His horse was an ordinary army plug which, with anyone but Private Williams, could sustain only two gaits — a clumsy trot and a rocking — horse gallop. But with the soldier a marvelous change came over the animal; he cantered or single-footed with proud, stiff elegance. The soldier's body was of a pale golden brown and he held himself erect. Without his clothes he was so slim that the pure, curved outlines of his ribs could be seen. As he cantered about in the sunlight, there was a sensual, savage smile on his lips that would have surprised his barrack mates. After such outings he came back weary to the stables and spoke to no one. (59-60)

The following passage also has the amorous quality of the above passage:

As the soldier passed between the stalls he heard the placid breath of the horses,
a sleepy snuffle and a whinny. Dumb, luminous eyes turned toward him. The young soldier took from his pocket an envelope of sugar and soon his hands were warm and sticky with slaver. He went into the stall of a little mare who was almost ready to drop her foal. He stroked her swollen belly and stood for a time with his arms around her neck. (23)

Private Williams' favourite horse is Firebird, a thoroughbred that belongs to Leonora, wife of Captain Wendell Penderton. Firebird plays an important part in the novel — he symbolizes the vital principle, the part of man that does not submit willingly to discipline. In fact Leonora has great difficult in training it. Just as the novelist ascribes certain animal qualities to Private Williams, she likewise ascribes to Firebird some of the qualities of a human being:

... now this brief daily struggle had a theatrical, affected air — it was a jocular pantomime performed for their own amusement and the benefit of spectators. Even when the froth showed in his mouth, the horse moved with a certain fractious grace as though aware of being
watched. And after it was over he stood quite still and sighed once, in much the same manner as a young husband would sigh laughingly and shrug his shoulders when giving in to the will of a beloved and termagant wife. (25)

Since the age of eight, Private Williams has avoided looking at women, because he was taught that they carry diseases which make men blind, deaf and crippled, and may finally send them to hell. This is the reason why he derives an apparently unnatural pleasure from contacts with animals. He is also a voyeur and spends his nights squatting by Leonora's bed watching her sleep.

A curious relationship develops between Private Williams and Captain Penderton. Captain Penderton is the most interesting and the most neurotic of all characters. He has a number of weaknesses; algolagnia is his main defect and he is a kleptomaniac and also, at least to a certain extent, a drug addict. He is a homosexual:

"Sexually, the Captain obtained within himself a delicate balance between the male and female elements,
with the susceptibility of both sexes and the active powers of neither" (10). Since he cannot perceive an acting masculine role, Captain Penderton seeks to acquire a mask of impersonality and an official identity, with the help of his rank and uniform. This is the reason why he wears his uniform whenever he goes out of the army post. But he is not satisfied with this kind of identity; he knows that, that identity is only deception and is inhuman in its dimensions. That is why during a conversation with Major Langdon he expresses his anger at the Major's views on the advantages conforming:

'You mean,' Captain Penderton said, 'that any fulfillment obtained at the expense of normalcy is wrong, and should not be allowed to bring happiness. In short, it is better, because it is morally honorable, for the square peg to keep scraping about the round hole rather than to discover and use the unorthodox square that would fit it?'

'Why, you put it exactly right,' the Major said. 'Don't you agree with me?'
'No,' said the Captain, after a short pause. With gruesome vividness the Captain suddenly looked into his soul and saw himself. For once he did not see himself as others saw him; there came to him a distorted doll-like image, mean of countenance and grotesque in form. The Captain dwelt on this vision without compassion. He accepted it with neither alteration nor excuse. 'I don't agree,' he repeated absently. (125)

Though he is intelligent, his intelligence lacks originality and it is mainly bookish because his function in the post is to teach military tactics. Many critics have expressed the view that Captain Penderton is the most thoroughly isolated character that McCullers ever created. As Richard M. Cook points out, "So removed is he from the lives of those around him, and so out of touch with any honestly felt human emotion, that he might pass as an exaggerated contrivance, an experiment in sheer grotesque characterization, were it not for the fact that deep within his troubled consciousness Penderton senses his alienation and at moments has the courage to see it for what it is."³

Captain Penderton knows about his insubstantiality but cannot change himself. Twice in the novel he tries to free himself of his insubstantiality. But both attempts prove disastrous. On one occasion, when he attempts to ride Firebird, the horse tries to throw him, then dashes off on a mad gallop through the forest while the terrified Captain, his face lashed by twigs and branches, clings desperately to the saddle. As the horse gallops madly along a narrow path through the woods,

Three words were in the Captain's heart. He shaped them soundlessly with trembling lips, as if he had not breath to spare a whisper: 'I am lost.'

And having given up life, the Captain suddenly began to live. A great mad joy surged through him. This emotion, coming as unexpectedly as the plunge of the horse when he had broken away, was one that the Captain had never experienced .... He was conscious of the pure keen air and he felt the marvel of his own tense body, his laboring heart, and the miracle of blood, muscle, nerves, and bone. The Captain knew no terror now ....(76)

But the delirious joy, which Penderton derives from a sudden feeling of physical involvement,
changes into hatred. When Firebird finally stops, the Captain whips him savagely, then throws himself on the ground, sobbing with rage. The ride on Firebird leaves him empty, broken, and more isolated than ever: "Out in the forest there, the Captain looked like a broken doll that had been thrown away" (78).

While he is in this position Private Williams arrives there, surveys the situation, and without a word leads the animal away. After this humiliating incident Captain Penderton becomes obsessed with the idea of taking revenge not on the animal but on Private Williams:

At first he could feel only astonishment. He dwelt on the pure-cut lines of the young man's body. He called out something inarticulate and received no reply. A rage came in him. He felt a rush of hatred for the soldier that was as exorbitant as the joy he had experienced on runaway Firebird. All the humiliations, the envies, and the fears of his life found vent in this great anger. (80)

Thus Penderton's first attempt to break out of his shell fails. The second time the compulsion to make contact with a vitalising physical energy asserts
itself, its victim is not a horse but a human being, Private Williams creeping upstairs to his wife's room. He picks up his revolver, goes upstairs, switches on the lights, and kills Private Williams with two expert shots that leave a single hole in the soldier's chest. Thus both his attempts to make contact with a more vital, authentic nature than his own fail and in the end he succeeds only in hurting those around him and exacerbating his already pathological state of mind: "The Captain had slumped against the wall. In his queer, coarse wrapper he resembled a broken and dissipated monk" (140).

Captain Penderton's wife, Leonora is a stupid, sensual woman. Her stupidity either goes unnoticed or is considered an asset. She is known as a great lady in the post. She is fond of riding and eating. The Pendertons have a peculiar marital history: "When she married the Captain she had been a virgin. Four nights after their wedding she was still a virgin, and on the fifth night her status was changed only enough to leave her slightly puzzled." (17) She is beautiful and so has no difficulty in getting satisfaction elsewhere. She
has had a number of lovers and the latest is Major Langdon. Leonora is the only good-natured character in the novel, though it is a deficiency of the head rather than a largeness of heart. She is not intelligent and so fails to be mean.

Major Langdon is reckless, insensitive and brutish. Though he is more intelligent than his mistress, Leonora, he rarely shows that. Leonora is merely mindless, but she does not harm anyone whereas Langdon is a threat to all expression of a civilized taste. He is angry with his wife who shows interest in classical music. He says, "to me it's like swallowing a bunch of angleworms" (82). As he says, "Only two things matter to me now — to be a good animal and to serve my country" (129). This statement of his clearly shows that riding horses, sleeping with Leonora, and following orders constitute his life style. The novelist reveals in the character of Langdon the fact that a man who is simple and graceful may also be a man who lacks imagination and sympathy. For instance, he spends a day and a half listening to his wife screaming in
child-birth. But because his daughter is born with a weak body and two fingers joined, he refuses to touch her.

Alison, Major Langdon's wife, is a weak hypochondriac. Her health worsens when she gives birth to a daughter with a frail body. When she comes to know about her husband's affair with Leonora, her health deteriorates further and she almost becomes a lunatic. She cuts off her nipples in a fit of self-mutilation. Penderton dislikes her, Leonora considers her an innocent child, and her husband simply ignores her. Alison has only two friends. One of them is Lieutenant Weincheck, whose army career has been a failure and who is unpopular with the other officers. Her other friend is Anacleto, the houseboy. She dreams of a romantic life with Anacleto. One of her main qualities is that she refuses to become angry even when she can be justifiably so. For instance, though she becomes weaker when she learns about her husband's affair with Leonora, she does not become angry. She satisfies herself by promising herself that she will divorce her husband, but her physical weakness combined with
a tendency to postpone things prevents her from
doing it. It is not an exaggeration to say that
Alison is a victim of self-hatred.

Anacleto was brought by the Langdons from
the Philippines. He adores his mistress and hates
his master. Like Lymon in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*,
Anacleto makes other characters stand in a clearer
light as they react to him. He is neither a male
nor a female, is ageless, and is an outsider in a
tightly closed social group. Like Lymon, he has
the habit of talking till late in the night with
the woman to whom he attaches himself, Alison, and
like Lymon he disappears from the community when
that woman meets her doom. Though Anacleto introduces
a little comedy into the novel, it is comedy mingled
with pathos.

The horse, Firebird, has such an important
role in the novel that we can justifiably consider
him a character in his own right. In fact in the
very beginning of the novel — in the first paragraph —
it is mentioned, "The participants of this tragedy
were: two officers, a soldier, two women, a Filipino,
and a horse" (2). Firebird symbolizes the vital principle. It can be said that the Captain's attempt to ride it represents his attempt to come to terms with and master, if possible, life. The two characters with whom Firebird feels at ease are Private Williams and Leonora. Leonora's success in taming the horse can be interpreted as her victory over the horse and also her husband, thus proving that she is closer to life than the Captain.

As already mentioned, the first section of the novel presents Private Williams and his encounter with Captain Penderton. The curious relationship that develops between Private Williams and Penderton has been compared to the one between Billy Budd and Claggart. Whatever Williams does irritates the Captain but at the same time the Captain has a sense of attraction towards Williams and is very eager to have an encounter with him. During the course of their relationship, it is the Captain who experiences tension:

The Captain followed Private Williams into the stable. The young soldier fed the horses mash and gave them a
rubdown. He did not speak, and the Captain stood outside the stall and watched him. He looked at the fine, skillful hands and the tender roundness of the soldier's neck. The Captain was overcome by a feeling that both repelled and fascinated him — it was as though he and the young soldier were wrestling together naked, body to body, in a fight to death. (84)

Williams is fully at ease with himself:

To this young Southern soldier the Officers were in the same vague category as Negroes — they had a place in his life, but he did not look on them as being human. He accepted the Captain as fatalistically as though he were the weather or some natural phenomenon. The Captain's behavior might seem unexpected, but he did not identify it with himself. And it did not occur to him to question it any more than he would question a thunderstorm or the fading of a flower. (135-36).

The other conflict that is presented in the first section of the novel is the one between Captain
Penderton and his wife, Leonora. Whenever she gets an opportunity, Leonora humiliates her husband.

One evening while passing the Penderton's house, Williams sees Leonora's nude body as she walks up upstairs to her bath. "... never before in his life had this young soldier seen a naked woman. He had been brought up in a household exclusively male.... Private Williams had never willingly touched, or looked at, or spoken to a female since he was eight years old" (20).

The second section of the novel covers the characteristic behaviour of the major characters in the novel: Captain Penderton, his wife Leonora, Major Langdon, his wife Alison, her servant Anacleto, and Private Williams. But Private Williams continues to be the principal character in the course of this section also. The sight of Leonora's nude body upsets him and he cannot remove it from his mind. Just as the thought of Williams obsesses Captain Penderton, the thought of Leonora comes to obsess Williams. For twelve nights Private Williams peeps through the window and then enters Leonora's room and sits there without moving until almost the morning and watches her sleep.
In section three we find Penderton frustrated as his authority is not recognized by Leonora. He tries to control Leonora's horse, Firebird, but instead of his getting control over the horse, the horse seems to get control over him as it carries him through the forest causing in him a fear that he will die. We also find in this section of novel Anacleto day-dreaming about a future with Alison.

Much of the final section occurs in darkness. Penderton's love-hate relationship with Williams continues. He is hypnotically fascinated by Private Williams. Whenever he gets an opportunity, he looks at the windows of the barracks to get a glimpse of Williams, who not only attracts him but also angers him.

Alison becomes more neurotic and jealous of Leonora because the latter has become her husband's sexual partner. She is frightened by a premonition that she is dying. One night, when Private Williams stealthily enters Leonora's room, Alison can see him only a shadowy figure and suspects that it is her husband. Her indignation towards Leonora increases
as she thinks that her husband is welcomed by Leonora even when Penderton is present in the house. She goes to Penderton and tells him that there is someone in his wife's room. But, thinking that her mind is not in her control, Penderton does not bother to investigate and escorts her back to her house. Alison tells her husband about her plans to file for divorce and to leave with Anacletol. Major Langdon calls a medical officer and arranges for admitting Alison in a mental hospital, where she dies of a heart attack a day or two late. Anacleto disappears from the scene since he does not have any other Alison to devote himself to.

A few nights later, Penderton, seated in his study, sees Williams entering Leonora's room. He takes his revolver, goes to his wife's room, switches on the light and kills Private Williams with two expert shots which leave a single hole in Williams' chest. Leonora is not at all disturbed by the death of Private Williams: "She stared about her as though witnessing some scene in a play, some tragedy that was gruesome but not necessary to believe" (140). Captain Penderton "slumped against
the wall .... he resembled a broken and dissipated monk" (140). In death, Private Williams looks natural, innocent, and at peace: "Even in death the body of the soldier still had the look of warm, animal comfort. His grave face was unchanged, and his sun-browned hands lay palms upward on the carpet as though in sleep" (140).

To conclude, each man and woman in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* exists in a state of spiritual isolation, induced largely by his or her own fears and fantasies. If the world of the army post is narrow, each character lives within his own world, which is still more narrow.