CHAPTER VIII
CONCLUSION

In order to make a final assessment of the fictional work of McCullers, we have to determine the characteristic strength and limitations of McCullers as a writer. Many critics have praised the work as a formidable achievement, and a few have even evoked the names of Tolstoy, Proust and Faulkner to describe the range and quality of her achievement. But their criticism appears to be more enthusiastic than critical. The limits of McCullers' achievements are real: "One reads through her works with a sharp sense of the highly individual, almost eccentric nature of her achievement, but also with a growing sense of their author's restricted range of interest and abilities." As Andre Gide would have it, her novels are utterly lacking in breadth. Most of her novels have a circumscribed area of concern, cut off from the outside contemporary life. The larger questions of politics, morals, race and history are shut out from her envisioning of the human situation located in the South with the exception of course of *Clock Without Hands*:

There is no place in her fiction, really, for the rich 'over-plus' of experience — by which I mean any aspects of behaviour
that cannot be included under the heading of theme, or any dimensions of feeling that cannot be reconciled with the major effect of pathos. And recognizing this she demonstrates little interest in such matters as the historical and social context, and no commitment either to the idea of a developing consciousness. Her people walk around and around within the circle of their own personalities, their inner world of thought and desire hardly engaging with the outer world. 2

But the failure of Clock Without Hands as a finished work of art only demonstrates how far removed McCullers' concern with larger contemporary issues had grown. The novel is deficient both in psychological intuition and cultural analysis. As Lawrence Graver rightly observed, McCullers is not an intellectual novelist; her fiction does not grow out of a broadening intellectual enquiry into new areas of thought and experience. Nor does she take into account the historical forces which govern the course of life and dispense the destiny of a whole people: "McCullers is fundamentally a master of bright and melancholy moods, a lyricist not a philosopher, an observer of maimed characters not of contaminated cultures." 3 Far more scathing and incisive is the comment of Richard Cook. He says, "human isolation is a theme that in McCullers' fiction circles further and further inward leading less and less to concerns beyond itself - a solipsistic pattern that may eventually have strangled her art." 4 Moreover, restrictions inherent in her theme were further subject to restrictions in time and place
as isolation for McCullers meant the South of her childhood. Images out of her past, the hard empty streets of Columbus, the dreary shaded backyards, the summer noises, became in her fiction metaphors for a spiritual loneliness and frustrated desire. As McCullers herself records in her essay 'The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing': "This is particularly true of Southern writers because it is not only their speech and foliage, but their entire culture — which makes it a homeland within a homeland. No matter what the politics, the degree or non-degree of liberalism in a Southern writer, he is still bound to this peculiar regionalism of language and voices and foliage and memory." In other words, McCullers in most of her works focusses on the protagonists self-centered world in which the macrocosm plays only a negligible role. The main characters seem caught up "in the pigeonholes of their neuroses, none of them reacts on the others. You watch them go through their paces like a series of parallel dots and the experience is barren." 

Even her treatment of love takes on an aspect of the grotesque. Maybe, she had been given the tragic sense of life and for her a fructifying love relationship is impossible to achieve. That might explain her selection of grotesque characters, who are incapable of forging any meaningful communication or dialogue with others. This utter incapacity for love makes it impossible for them to join the outside world.
of normal public human beings. This is, to say the least, a circumscribing of the concept of love. She herself confessed in 'The Flowering Dream: Notes on Writing': "Love, and especially love of a person who is incapable of returning or receiving it, is at the heart of my selection of grotesque figures to write about — people whose physical incapacity is a symbol of their spiritual incapacity to love or receive love — their spiritual isolation." Evidently this makes her treatment of love unidimensional; her major characters are invariably emotional failures. Verily, this is a very narrow, negative viewing of love but that is her basic artistic premise and one has to appraise her work as it is and not as it should have been.

McCullers' fiction is limited to the repeated exploration of one idea or emotional state — the individual in his relation with others. And the theme is loneliness and the inevitable frustration of love. The scene is the deep South; the characters are estranged and disadvantaged. Her primary concern in all her novels is the same — man alone: "Few Americans have evoked the terrors and the pathos of man alone as well as she has. Loneliness is a feeling pervasive and permanent in the physical world of her novels; it is also a fact in all of her characters' lives, a condition that brings each of them together into fragile
communities of mutual isolation." McCullers wrote of man's isolation with a rare sympathy and with an insight into hidden suffering, which represent the highest accomplishment of her fiction. She spoke for people who, in their trapped inwardness, could not speak for themselves; who loved without hope of being loved. She speaks of such characters with an understanding that was as compassionate as it was despairing: "Running throughout her works is the unstated conviction that no human being can in his inmost, truest self ever be really known, that he is doomed either to eternal loneliness or to compromise with the crass world outside." Her adolescent figures are treated with humorous tolerance and with sympathetic understanding, and their frustration, bitterness, confusion and feeling of isolation are explored. The idiosyncrasies of some of these characters arrest our attention, arouse amusement or shock us. "Such personages," says Margaret B. McDowell, "function symbolically or metaphorically, as well as realistically." Infact, McCullers uses freaks as symbols of the normal and they are contrived deliberately to dramatize a thesis, not to imitate situations in real life. What she conceives to be the truth about human nature — each man is surrounded by a zone of loneliness serving a life sentence of solitary confinement. The only way in which he can communicate with his fellow prisoners is through love but love is seldom a completely mutual experience and leads but to frustration, suffering or
bitterness. As in The Ballad of the Sad Café, the beloved 
feels and hates the lover, shutting out all possibilities 
of consummation. A flaw exists in the very nature of love, 
and frustration is the lot of men. Love, the attempt at 
ideal communication, is usually unreturned, unrecognized, 
mistaken for its opposite, or made difficult if not impossible 
by social and sometimes even biological considerations. It 
sounds a pessimistic statement on life and love but who 
knows that it corresponds to human reality.

However, McCullers' vision of human loneliness is 
a vision born of love. Unlike her characters, she possessed 
a double vision that enabled her to see the inside and the 
outside of people. It was her love which enabled her to see 
her characters for what they were, "In her more successful 
works," remarks Richard Cook, "McCullers could, as she once 
claimed, 'become' her characters, enter their lonely lives, 
the places where they lived. And without letting us lose 
sight of their awkward, sometimes frightening and often 
amusing outwardness, she let us see into their secret 
inwardness."¹¹ In her novels she deals again and again 
with the desperate need the human beings feel for mutual 
understanding and love which is rarely achieved. She is 
acutely aware of the fact that we have lost, as Lionell 
Trilling put it, "something of our power to love."¹² It is 
only through the author's love, that such characters who
fail in love have been created. It is through her love that McCullers was able to create strange grotesque characters and also to penetrate through such anonymous public labels as the militant black, the radical, the pervert, to the unique individual beneath. It was McCullers' deep understanding and love of such freaks which enabled her to create memorable characters in her novels. As she herself commented, "How, without love and the intuition that comes from love, can a human being place himself in the situation of another human being? He must imagine, and imagination takes humility, love, and great courage. How can you create a character without love and the struggle that goes with love?" Only through compassion and empathy of art could McCullers create such characters as were enmeshed in their intense subjectivity, mysterious even to themselves. She loved them as she understood them, or, as Henry James has said of Balzac and his characters: "it was by loving that he knew them, not by knowing that he loved them." Without passing any final judgement on their behaviour, McCullers portrayed the characters with a penetrating sympathy for their peculiar, often eccentric individuality. They carry conviction because she lets them live and breathe in their own contradictions.
Besides her characterization, McCullers' artistry lay, to a considerable degree as Margaret B. McDowell puts it, "in the remarkable virtuosity of her language — her blending of the poetic with the prosaic, of the formal with the colloquial, of the mystical and metaphorical perspective with the details of life in an ordinary small Southern town or a sleepy army post."\(^{15}\) As a result, her characters come alive with all their individual and idiosyncratic particularities. The symbolic and the metaphorical use of language, provides an indepth study of their essential loneliness. Her subtle humor and her poignant treatment of the tragic tempered with her sympathy for the frustrated individuals indicate the deep compassion to be found in her work. She has a remarkable poetic gift to present effectively the pathos and tragedy inherent in the life of the frustrated lonely individuals. The language she employs is suited to the inward action involving changes of moods and psychic crisis. Longing for her prose to emerge suffused with the light of poetry McCullers distrusted her own tendencies to use full documentary detail in recounting an event. To reproduce regional dialect, she wanted her language to operate as music does. As in a fugue, McCullers could skilfully fuse opposing emotions like love and anger, or love and hate, which characterize the personages in her novels, as for example, in *The Member of the Wedding*, when Frankie and Berenice talk philosophically and with deep
emotion, one hears dynamic dialogue as the women clash with each other and vividly reveal the anger and the tenderness they feel for each other: "In the elusive changes of mood, the relationships among characters, the interplay among themes, and the interweaving of theme and metaphor she sought, (McCullers said), 'precision and harmony' much as a poet would." 16

McCullers has in her fiction drawn some truths that are common to all men; the loneliness and the capacity for contradictory behavior that falls to the lot of men. In her gothic view of life, McCullers has depicted the terrors of life but has "succeeded perhaps too well in creating an art form that is cut off from life. It is a form cut off from society, from morality, from religion, from ideas, from concern with man's burden or man's hope. But It is a special art form, and its special quality makes it symptomatic of the phenomena we have always with us — a disturbed psyche and a disturbed time." 17

However, the advantage of keeping her fictional horizon on a low plane is that there is more space around and beyond, in the picture, for the background of those eternal elements which both govern and dwarf man's petty endeavour. McCullers' achievement in her fiction especially, is in fact, a poet's achievement; she shows how the laws
that govern human nature are often as disconcerting to our self-esteem as they are frustrating to our spiritual aspirations. In the words of A. S. Knowles, Jr.:

If we should now decide that she was essentially a minor writer, however, this is only to suggest that her vision was often limited and special. Like Biff's Zinnia, her art was a kind of hybrid, mixing the familiar and universal with the strange and personal. Within the scope of that vision, she handled her themes of love, loneliness, alienation, and identity with precision and, at her least morbid and most natural, great tenderness.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3 Lawrence Graver, *Carson McCullers*, p.42.

4 Richard M. Cook, op.cit., p.124.


8 Richard M. Cook, op.cit., p.124.

9 Ibid., p.126.

10 Margaret B. McDowell, *Carson McCullers*, p.145.

11 Richard M. Cook, op.cit., p.128.


15 Margaret B. McDowell, op. cit., p. 145.

16 Ibid., p. 81.
