CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

In the United States, novels and short stories identified as the 'New-Fiction' in the 1940's registered a point of departure from the social novel of protest dominant in the 1930's. The thirties ended with the publication of John Steinback's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), the finest work of art in sociological fiction. This kind of fiction went into eclipse in the forties, and the forties opened with the publication of the first novels by Robert Penn Warren (*Night-Rider*), Walter Van Tilburg Clark (*The Ox-box Incident*), and Carson McCullers (*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*) which all bear one meaningful similarity: although they show an interest in social issues, they turn away from these issues to find their real centre in moral problems or inward concerns, the inward private being. This shift in emphasis reveals a characteristic tendency of the fiction in the forties.

In terms of socio-political criteria, the two events of smashing impact that attended the death of the thirties and the birth of the forties were the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 and the outbreak of the war in Europe a short time after, a war the United States entered in 1941. The pact signalled the
death of marxist ideals in the United States. And the war, unleashed by the fascists, revealed a capacity for evil in human beings that struck at certain optimistic psychological assumptions peculiar to liberal democracy. "It cast doubt upon the potential for survival of the democratic culture that had come to us from the humanistic Renaissance and the Enlightenment. It numbed the individual conscience, inducing nihilism and acquiescence in the loss of human identity. All these consequences of both the pact and the war were to have an effect upon the fiction of the forties."¹ The fiction writers in the forties, therefore, were primarily concerned with the survival of the individual identity in a world deprived of all traditional props.

The 'New-Fiction' rejects social, political, philosophical ideas as the legitimate subject matter of fiction. The writers want to create a pure fiction which would be a-political and a-social in nature. In the words of Chester E. Bisinger, "the safe generalization about the new fiction is that it is without loyalties to any order of society and without hope for a different or better order than the one it sees."² In other words, it has no allegiance to a particular social system or structure. It does not regard the pursuit of the self as a sustaining quest for meaning in life; rather the 'New-Fiction' confronts the irreducible self negatively.
The 'New-Fiction' originated in a reaction on the part of writers in the forties to a world where dislocation of values and spiritual drought had created a situation of disorder and hopelessness. The 'New-Fiction', like the 'New-Criticism' laid all emphasis on technique. Technique is the way the materials of art are apprehended and organized. It includes the style of writing which the writer uses to grasp reality and to deform it, making an image of life that will move us. The 'New-Fiction' in contrast with the social novel, is inward-turning. It records the inner experience, the psychic life of its characters and uses symbols, myth and ritual to present the poetic viewpoint and meaning.

In the South one kind of 'New-Fiction' draws heavily on the Gothic imagination. The South, because of its historical and spiritual ruins, was particularly hospitable to the Gothic. The Gothic is a way of apprehending experience that served the purpose of such writers as Truman Capote and Paul Bowles as also Carson McCullers and Eudora Welty. The Gothic interpretation of experience does not necessarily constitute a reaction of blank revulsion against the world. The Gothic vision is symbolic of these writer's conviction that both society and man frustrate the quest for the self. In this sense the Gothic becomes in the hands of Truman Capote, "a variation on the pervasive theme of fiction
in the forties: the inward-turning search for the dimensions of the Self." Carson McCullers work is governed by the aesthetics of the primitive. This means that her over-view is essentially anti-realistic.

Like Eudora Welty, Catherine Anne Porter and Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers has by exploring the lives of isolated grotesques in twilight corners of the American South, produced a small body of fiction marked by eccentric originality, artistic finish and a bleak poetic effect. Her characters are, by and large, abnormal, egocentric, bizarre and lonely. In Chester E. Eisinger's words,

This aesthetics dictates an intense concentration on man's most urgent emotional needs: a communion of dialogue and love. For her, further, the truth of the fable is the truth of the heart. It is not concerned with abstractions about the structure of society or with ideological conflicts in the contemporary world. She has banished these sociological and intellectual matters from her fiction, narrowing its range, perhaps to its detriment, in favour of memory and moods, and above all feeling. This aesthetic demands a poetic prose and style which McCullers skilfully uses to good effect.

Many critics have awarded high praise to McCullers for her imaginative range and incisive commentary and interpretation of the isolated, fragmented characters of the provincial South. Walter Allen commenting in The Modern Novel in Britain and the United States, speaks highly of
McCullers' genius; "Faulkner apart, the most remarkable novelist the South has produced seems to me Carson McCullers... Carson McCullers's genius is at least as strange as Faulkner's, but expressed with lucidity and precision, a classical simplicity. However tortured her vision may seem, there is nothing tortured or odd in the texture of her prose; and the raw material of her art is the world as commonly observed."\(^5\) Tennessee Williams consistently praised her as a worker of miracles; V.S.Pritchett in 1955 called her "the best American novelist in a generation."\(^6\) Gore Vidal called her, "the greatest and most lasting of the Southern Writers."\(^7\) The praise obviously seems overstated. It is idle to compare her with the profound masters of European or American literature. Her achievement is moderate; nonetheless, she can easily be equated with the Southern writers of a moderate level of accomplishment.

The South invariably looms large in the background of her fictional situation and character. Her portrayal of the South is never sentimentalized. It is a land rich in folk-lore and colourful superstition but a land where a man's life may be worth no "more than a load of hay."\(^8\) It is a region where servants like Portia and Berenice have dignity and become fully portrayed human beings but where racial hatred brings tragedy to other blacks like Willie Copeland, Honey Camdendown Brown or Sherman Pew. It is a region where white workers, as well as blacks, become "lint-heads"\(^9\) in
textile mills, who refuse to follow radical union organizers and are dehumanized by monotonous work. It is also a beautiful region where children hide in the shade of an harbour and smell "the heavy scuppernong grapes" or where one moves down heavily wooded trails covered with golden autumn leaves. The awareness of the South no doubt forms the background of all her longer fiction, but the intensity of her fiction finds roots in a sense of isolation and homelessness that her characters experience wherever they are.

Although at home in realistic narrative, McCullers moves easily into the symbolic and allegorical dimensions of her art. She has exploited the grotesque dramatically as well as with comic effect, to bring out effectively the essential loneliness of all individuals. Her inherent belief in the sense of evil to be found in human nature and in a regimented society, found expression in fiction which has symbolic and allegorical implications. The grotesque has its source in the characters' inability to communicate, and their utter incapacity to relate one to another. Isolation, to which it leads, becomes all the more intensified because her characters fail to arrive at what Aristotle calls 'the point of recognition'. In modern parlance, they do not achieve awareness and therefore they cannot relate; they cannot love. Ideally love for McCullers should provide the dialogue (as Martin Buber would have it) through which the separate
individual relates to another individual or to a group. But McCullers chooses people whose need, to be sure, is demonstrable but whose capacities are crippled. If one asks, "Who am I?" "Where am I?" and finds no answer through personal relationships with those who accept him, he will be vulnerable to fear — a primary source in McCullers' work of all evil. He then defines himself only in terms of what he is not — and hates whatever is identified as the other, that is, those who are unlike him. This habitual disposition to image-building constitutes an insurmountable obstacle to communicate with others, shutting out all avenues to love.

The purpose of her aesthetic lies in executing her "own indigenous vision, and having done that, to keep faith with this vision." If to keep faith means to pursue consistently a single theme, then McCullers has registered a complete success, for in all her novels she works at variations on the theme of isolation and love which can, but does not, lead an individual out of this isolation. She seems compelled to write about the loneliness of individuals even when they are surrounded by a world full of individuals: "It is the paradoxes of loneliness and love that impel her characters to a wretched abandonmunt of hope and leave them to feed on the pain of frustrated communion. She is fascinated by the loneliness of individuals in a world full of individuals. She is possessed by the unceasing failures
in the consummation of love, because the lover is always rejected by the beloved, who would himself be a lover, and the lover thus goes on dying, into infinity, his spiritual death. These lonely hunters, in McCullers' fiction, fail to enter into a fructifying human relationship. The dialogue of love and the language of the heart is not for them. The failure of love condemns them to eternal loneliness and spiritual death. They carry their nesc about them, and hell is their incapacity to love. In McCullers' vision, there is no resting place for the tortured, half-people, no solution for their corrosive loneliness. Though never overtly stated, the characters in her novels are always groping their way to the achievement of self-identity via love, which more often than not eludes them. As McCullers sees it, the characters are incapable of love because they remain meshed up in the cocoon of their egocentric self and do not become aware of the fact that they themselves are, to a large extent, instrumental for this lack of communication. It is a tribute to McCullers' artistic acumen and skill that she lends a sense of pathos and humanity to these characters. It is because she knows that they are victims of the irrational which they cannot fathom nor analyze and understand. And the irrational operates around them as well as within them. It is with these facts in mind that a study of Carson McCullers' fiction has been attempted and I have tried to explain and analyze the quest for love in the characters of McCullers.
The second chapter deals with McCullers' theme of the isolated individual seeking escape through love in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. In this novel McCullers presents loneliness as an affliction of the solitary hunter who may possibly be cured by love and certainly can be cured by nothing else. Love is the only available anodyne to isolation. Described by McCullers as 'Spokes' in a wheel with Singer as the hub — the four characters (Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Jake Blount, Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland) do not come close to one another despite their attachment to and affection for Singer. For example, when Singer buys a radio for his new friends to hear, they stand about awkwardly in his room, unable to converse with one another. Each one of them remains isolated from the other; nonetheless all of them crave love; but none of the characters except Singer is unselfish enough to love others with sincerity. Singer does love selflessly the retarded deaf-mute who can only respond to affection instinctively as a pet or a baby might. The attention Singer offers to the other four characters, appears to be love and is partly love, yet he does not comprehend their needs fully. The inability of Singer to speak both symbolizes and dramatizes the lack of understanding and the lack of communication among the characters. The other characters 'sing' of their needs and thoughts to Singer, who ironically, cannot really sing or express himself adequately.
No true communication takes place between Singer and his disciples who all remain egoists. Singer further their narcissism by providing with his eyes the mirror, wherein they seem to see reflected their own image. Only one character, Portia Copeland alone succeeds in establishing a satisfying social relationship. But even she is inhibited by a society motivated by prejudice to fulfil a secure relationship with her father. Love in this novel is difficult to come by and is transient in most cases: but it always remains an open possibility.

The third chapter deals with Reflections in a Golden Eye where McCullers recognizes more decisively that irrationality and evil lie as close to the heart of human experience as do the hunger for love and its possible redemptive influence. Whoever acknowledges that the universe is malign, or even sees that it is indifferent to the individual human being, may learn to laugh at it. McCullers felt that he may also learn to accept the fact that life is strange, uncomfortable and never fully meaningful in human and rational terms, and may further realize that effort and inertia are equally powerless to change the universe.

In Reflection in a Golden Eye, McCullers localizes the action by limiting it to a military base in order to suggest the presence of a closed society. The characters are
further enclosed by their lack of emotional and intellectual
development. As in The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, 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. Significant communication between
individuals is totally absent. The dehumanised military
post suggests the utter aimlessness and futility of life in
general for people who have lost touch with values of any
kind, so that only a few are capable even of deep grief and
despair. Reality, as perceived by the characters in this
novel, is fragmented, blurred and out of proportion—like
the grotesque reflections to be found in the Golden Eye of
a jewelled peacock. The critics who dismissed this book as
bizarre, fantastic or allegorical did not realize that
McCullers here is expressing her profound distrust of the
intelligence as an exclusive means of interpreting human
experience. The book indicates her growing distrust of
realism as a literary mode which relies upon rationally stated
motivations for its characters. Rather, she seems to be
experimenting with the non-realistic literary mode often
regarded as 'Gothic'. In spite of her documentation of the
routine military life in Reflections in a Golden Eye she has
gone far beyond satirical realism in her pre-occupation with
the irrational behaviour. Here, she focuses her attention
upon the intuitive and the sensual and lays emphasis on natural
landscape as symbols of the uninhibited, unconscious elements
in the psyche.
Excepting Alison, all other characters like Ellgee Williams, Leonora Penderton, Captain Penderton in *Reflections in a Golden Eye* are either primitives or perverts. They are capable neither of relating to other human beings, nor of forming even the most elemental moral discrimination. Alison herself lacks the clarity of vision and the strength of will to alter the stultifying society of which she is a member. She is incapable of freeing herself from it. The meaning McCullers seems to suggest unmistakably is, that in this closed irrational universe the limitations of human beings themselves give rise to a society that has little continuity and significance. She would seem to imply that if human beings could be more rational and selfless, the universe, if finally inexplicable, would at least become more bearable and hospitable to men. Meaningful relationship and love are out of reach for such characters as lead a fragmented existence and are given over to moral vacancy, self deceit and perverse sensual excitement.

The fourth chapter deals with the most autobiographical novel by McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*. Her lifelong sense of herself as different from other people and consequently, as peculiarly isolated, finds powerful artistic expression in her portrayal of Frankie's distress in the novel. Perhaps, the autobiographical element became for McCullers
at the time of writing this novel more insistent. Like McCullers, Frankie is extraordinarily sensitive to sound and silence and she continually relates music to her mood, her developing philosophy and her situation. In the words of Margaret B. McDowell, "McCullers saw this novel and the play which developed from it as 'Poetic' compositions comprised of 'fugue-like' passages. In the elusive changes of mood, the relationships among characters, the interplay among themes, and the interweaving of theme and metaphor, she sought, she said, 'precision and harmony' much as a poet would." The novel depends for its impact upon the characterization of Frankie and Berenice as they encounter conflict and bewildering change, both within themselves and the world surrounding them. The dramatic action is complex because each of the two figures is treated as a composite of the many unreconciled identities within her individual psyche.

The very title (The Member of the Wedding) suggests a longing on the part of Frankie to enter a joined life. Wedding is symbolic of the new revitalizing companionship, like the christening implies the naming of a newly-born baby. On the eve of the wedding ceremony, Frankie discovers a state of security and elation she has never known before - her "wedding frame of mind" in which she understands the 'joined' life or the 'we of me' she has waited for throughout her 'scared spring' and 'crazy summer!', but the wedding is suddenly wrecked and
Frankie once again, assumes her legal name, Frances — she is again the scared, crazy and unjoined Frankie. Ironically in her desolation she turns her back on those with whom she has actually been 'joined' and refuses the comfort that Berenice, John Henry or her father could have offered her. As McCullers views it, Frankie's tragedy lies in her non-realization of her sexual identity and in her incapacity to reach adult independence. She remains a grown-up baby given to dreaming.

However, Berenice offers a sharp contrast to Frankie, in that she still longs for another marriage to match her perfect union with her former husband Ludie Freeman, and unlike Frankie, is not willing to relinquish her freedom and individuality. Berenice becomes in the novel, a force of affirmation: She fights for happiness rather than resigning herself to the life of a victim of fate. She still can make vigorous decisions, that is, she feels free even though she is a black. She is the one who can become a member again of a perfect wedding and 'bust free'. In the presentation of Berenice, the focus often shifts from the psychological tragedy implicit in her widowhood to the configurations in American Society - economic, racial and family -- which further entrap her. We know that she is, as she says, 'more caught' because she is black in a society where whites have power. But in spite of these limitations Berenice asserts her independence and the will to act: "I got as much right as anybody to
continue to have a good time so long as I can... I got many long years ahead of me before I resign myself to a corner." Perhaps this is McCullers' way of showing how a lonely individual can overcome his or her fate.

The discussion of *The Ballad of the Sad Café* which forms the fifth chapter of this thesis underscores once again McCullers' recurring motifs that chronic isolation lies at the centre of human experience, that there is an utter lack of any genuine basis for communication with other men or women. Even love fails to bridge the gap. Love, becomes in this novella, a force which drives the lover into deeper isolation by driving him in on himself. Love is the dreadful result of an individual's isolation and its intensifier, rather than its cure. Eros, if frustrated, leads to hatred and destruction. Agape is an ideal, an inspiring influence, seldom to be attained as a pure and lasting force, though it alone can give order and meaning to our chaotic lives. Spontaneous and lasting fellowship is an impossibility. The forced and uneasy fellowship in the Café, like the harmony and solidarity of the chain gang, lacks genuineness.

McCullers defines love in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* through Miss Amelia Evans's character. Product of her love, the Café is the symbol of human affection to create intimacy and delight where only barrenness existed before. Yet, if love
can sweeten and refine, it can also leave the lover defenseless. Having created the beloved in the image of his own desperate desire, the lover is open to rebuff and betrayal, for he tempts the one permanent quality of his beloved, her cruelty. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, the beloved is a static figure chosen by someone else. Here, as in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the principal character remains a lonely hunter, after a brief period of love expended upon an unlovable and unresponsive person. Pity for others and the desire to achieve a meaningful communion with them are absent. All the more so, as the isolation in the lives of Amelia, Marvin Macy and cousin Lymon intensifies. In *The Ballad of the Sad Café* isolation, fear and guilt return even to the lives of the townspeople after Amelia loses the game in the struggle between Marvin Macy and herself.

The sixth chapter deals with *Clock Without Hands* which was published after a gap of fifteen years. It received tremendous response and varied critical reaction. Gore Vidal considered the novel to be "uneven and uncertain" but found that, "even this near failure of McCullers is marvelous to read, and her genius for prose remains one of the few satisfying achievements of our second-rate culture." Nancy Sandroff considered that in *Clock Without Hands* McCullers still, "continues to probe and delve deep into the secret
selves of her characters. What she finds and reports is always a rich mine of revelation to the reader." Rumer Godden lavishing praise on the novel felt that "not a word could be added or taken away from this marvel of a novel by Carson McCullers" and felt that she is "an uncomparable story teller." McCullers in Clock Without Hands portrays life on a much larger canvas so that it becomes the most comprehensive and inclusive among her fictional works. Racial antagonism, political controversy, class differences and the barriers between generations are all issues explored in this novel, making it, "the most significant novel of the year concerning race relations." All these issues, however, are explored in this novel primarily as realities which magnify loneliness, isolation and internal conflict.

Violent deaths seem to be the recurrent motif of Clock Without Hands and violent deaths reflect racial conflict — black man murders a white and is executed, a retarded black adolescent dies when a policeman carelessly strikes him, a black youth hangs the pet dog of a white youth and he himself is later killed when his house is bombed by racists.

The title Clock Without Hands symbolizes a world where the characters ignore the course of history and the passage of time, where time does not march and life stagnates, breeding violence and death. McCullers delineates the barren
quality of the life of her characters; for them, the clock has never had hands because their lives are too insignificant to be the subject of any sort of measurement. Each day for them is a repetition of every other day, full of hopeless monotony. The tragedy of their deaths increases precisely because their lives have been so pointless. A number of individuals die before they can discover meaning in their lives and solace in human relationship. The dullness, barrenness and limitations of their daily experience make living for such people inconsequential and their dying is equally pointless. They do not exist in time — they live lonely lives and are situated in space. Not only do Sherman Pew and Sammy Lank embody this theme of wasted human potential but so do the retarded adolescent Grown Boy and the blind and legless black beggar Wagon. Malone lives "surrounded by a zone of loneliness" and Judge Fox Clane also lives according to clock without hands as he does not take into account the passage of time and the forces of history.

Although positive reviews ended generally to praise the novel to the extent of claiming that "this brilliant haunting novel undoubtedly will be marked hereafter as one of the very best works of fiction ever written by an American," many critics found it inferior to most of McCullers' earlier
works. Donald Emerson found "uncertainty about her objective that weakens Clock Without Hands... and the total effect is below her own standard." The most common weaknesses mentioned are a lack of controlled organization, a carelessness in style or a dependence on flat or stereotypical characterization.

In the seventh chapter I have analyzed short stories which are relevant to this study. In her short stories McCullers treats once again the theme of loneliness, caused by the psychic distance which it is habitual for the growing children to experience. The child or the adolescent is usually beset with the essential narcissism of human beings. The incorrigible habit of seeking a mirror-image of oneself in another, makes it impossible for the child protagonist to enter into a meaningful relationship with others. However, the need to relate to others emotionally, to reach for love abides. In stories like 'Sucker' and 'Like That', although McCullers does succeed in recreating emotional responses and reactions peculiar to the immature and the adolescent, there is a lack of artistic organization in the inclusion of irrelevant details. This indicates only that McCullers had not yet achieved full control of action which is manifest in her novels.

However, stories like 'Madam Zilensky and the King of Finland', 'Jockey', present characters whose weakness makes
them vulnerable. They live in a world of fantasy and are given to image making. The ironic contrast which McCullers manipulates successfully generates a comic interest. In her later stories such as 'A Tree, A Rock, A Cloud', 'A Domestic Dilemma' and 'The Sojourner' McCullers tried her hand at varied formal devices to make her narration impactful and her characters verisimilar and convincing. In these stories she is concerned primarily with the nature of love. Love in these stories is a dominant and incomprehensible force, but indispensable to the acquisition of self-knowledge. McCullers justifiably does not oversimplify the concept of love: it is too complex to be separated from hatred, pity, hope or even despair.

The eighth chapter is an attempt to sum up the fictional range of Carson McCullers. Her achievement as a story-teller and a writer of fiction is substantial and undeniable but, "as in the case of her Southern contemporary Flannery O'Connor we are continually haunted by the sense of what might have been, had she lived long enough to consolidate her powers and to mature even more richly her artistic skill and her insight into human nature."

She might have been able to enlarge the scope and range of her fictional universe. Nonetheless, the study of McCullers' works provides the reader with a dynamic spiritual and aesthetic experience: her gifts are manifold, intense and varied.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


2 Ibid., p. 232.

3 Ibid., p. 237.

4 Ibid., pp. 243-244.


7 Ibid.


10 Margaret B. McDowell, op.cit., p. 146.

12 Ibid., p. 263.

13 Chester E. Eisinger, op. cit., p. 244.

14 Margaret B. McDowell, op. cit., p. 31.


16 Ibid., p. 79.


18 Ibid.


21 Ibid.


26 Margaret B. McDowell, op.cit., p.146.