THE DILEMMA OF THE LONELY HEARTS

Carson McCullers' fiction is based on a solid and well-grounded premise: the spiritual isolation of man. Her first novel The Heart is a Lonely Hunter gave full expression to this theme. She herself clearly states, "Spiritual isolation is the basis of most of my themes. My first book was concerned with this, almost entirely, and all of my books since, in one way or another. 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." \(^1\)

McCullers' characters are lonely and isolated - imprisoned in the stifling barricades of selfhood. Love liberates them from the thraldom of isolation but this liberating influence is too ephemeral to last long. The inevitable consequence is the pain of frustrated communion. Like the medieval holy man or knight McCullers' characters are questers seeking love. Whereas the medieval questers succeeded in their mission, McCullers' questers seek, grasp and lose - the heart is a lonely hunter for most of the time. The medieval questers succeeded because they had a coherent and stable order to guide them. McCullers' characters fail miserably precisely because they woefully lack it. Her fiction delineates "the whole spectacle of love and pain ... in which the idea of spiritual isolation comes repeatedly to focus." \(^2\)
The vision of man's spiritual isolation and his futile endeavour to seek some meaningful relationship with others occupied Carson McCullers' imagination and sensibility right from the onset of her literary career. In one of her earlier stories entitled "Sucker", McCullers proclaimed the non-reciprocity of love. Sucker is the nickname of a small boy whose desperate efforts to identify himself with his adolescent cousin, Pete, end in a traumatic experience. The basic fabric of McCullers' vision is woven in this story though the hues are not so deep and dark. "If a person admires you a lot you despise him and don't care and it is the person who doesn't notice you that you are apt to admire . . . I suppose I was mean to him lots of time. I guess I wanted to ignore someone like Maybelle did me." These words of Pete, who narrates the story in retrospect, "evolved into a basic tenet in Carson's fiction." Though merely a sketch, this story indicates the paradigm of love and frustration that takes shape in McCullers' later fiction.

Originally entitled The Mute and re-christened as The Heart is a Lonely Hunter at the publisher's suggestion, the novel's thematic concern is with man's loneliness and his spiritual isolation. The very title of the novel is suggestive of its theme and point of view. Man, McCullers believes, instinctively rebels against his emotional isolation. He seeks spiritual integration with something outside himself. For the fulfilment of this desire he creates some "unifying principle or God." But in a society bereft of meaningful order, stabilising norms and cohesive values these self-created unifying principles or Gods are likely to be "chimerical and fantastic." They are moulded more out of personal feelings than
objective reality. The novelist also hits at the narcissistic tendencies so pervasively present in modern disorganised society. In the absence of meaningful relationships and healthy bonds the members of modern society lean heavily on their private dreams and visions for emotional sustenance and spiritual support. The tragic fall-out of such an inner-oriented life is seen in the distorted vision of reality and life cultivated by the members of the society.

John Singer, a mute, is passionately attached to his moronic, deaf-mute friend through whom he seeks the fulfilment of his emotional and spiritual needs notwithstanding his friend’s indifference. In a moronic mute, Singer perceives a rare wisdom, profundity and tranquillity. For Singer, his friend Antonapoulos is what Taylor calls the “perfect conversationalist” — perfect because he refuses to communicate enabling Singer to reach out to him. The Greek becomes “the perfect vehicle for Singer to use in creating a dream world of imagined communication. ... [Because Singer] sings for no one but himself” (Italics mine). The crux of the problem lies here “for no one but himself.” Singer’s suicide is the termination, the inevitable finale of that solitary song. Singer loves his friend, reveals the inner-most recesses of his heart to him without ever trying to find out “how much his friend understood of all the things he told him” (The Heart, p.2). In fact, he never feels the need: Antonapoulos serves as a mirror in which he can see himself reflected. Apparently trying to reach out to Antonapoulos, he is, in fact, trying to get in touch with himself. In other words Singer lives in
his own world - a world steeped in his private dreams, a world full of illusions and divorced from reality.

For Singer, the moronic mute is the manifestation of nobility, sagacity and serenity. In him Singer finds “nothing that was wrong or foolish - only the wise and good” (The Heart, p.173). Singer elevates his friend to a high pedestal; in him he discerns a kind of Buddha, the enlightened one. Thus for Singer, friendship, love, society and even God converge in the figure of Antonapoulos. By making the Greek, the repository of the “stored-up love which has lain quiet within” (The Ballad, p. 26), Singer wills his isolation. His experience of love is going to distil only pain because in the blind and fanatic pursuit of a fantastic “unifying principle” in his life, he cuts himself off from the world at large.

While Singer seeks his spiritual saviour in a mentally retarded Greek, the four main characters focus on John Singer as their “home-made God” (p.198). They unburden themselves, ironically, to a mute for they perceive in him the kind of God who answers to their inner needs. “Each man described the mute as he wished him to be” (The Heart, p.190). Their illusions are shattered when following Antonapoulos’ death, Singer commits suicide and the other four face the frightening phantom of loneliness.

Singer, therefore, becomes the focal point in the lonely lives of four persons and his presence assuages their loneliness. But that is not because Singer loves them or has some meaningful relationship with them. He does not discourage their visits to his room as they relieve him of his
loneliness. Singer's attitude to these four persons is best illustrated by his letter to Antonapoulos wherein he writes, "They come up to my room and talk to me until I do not understand how a person can open or shut his or her mouth so much without being weary. . . . I do not understand. . . . I have queer feelings. . . . I know you are weary of it. I am also: (The Heart, p.184). Singer's descriptions of the four characters who treat him like a God are not tinged with sympathy or understanding: "The one with the mustache [Jake Blount] is crazy. . . . This black man [Dr. Copeland] frightens me sometimes" (p.183). These comments reveal Singer's reaction to his 'followers': it is as if Singer and these four persons "were from different cities" (p.184). By rejecting the others around him and by completely surrendering to his private world, Singer chooses the path of spiritual isolation for himself, a path which he finds onerous and arduous. He seeks release from it by pumping a bullet in his chest.

In The Heart, McCullers explores another form of isolation — an isolation which springs up when life is lived as an unintegrated and disinterested spectator and not as an active, involved actor. With her Southern identity, McCullers instinctively understands and grasps the dimensions of an isolation brought about by the denial of the wholeness of life. For a Southerner living is a complex affair where the concreteness of human relationships, a deep sense of community, loyalties and pieties play a significant role. A Southerner visualises both life and the process of living as an organic whole and not as something broken into separate and unconnected compartments. In the figure of Biff Brannon, McCullers focusses on a trait which alienates human beings from the vital current of
life, the lack of an integrated, balanced and whole life. Instead of visualising himself as a complete, whole human being with his past, present and future synthesised into a concrete driving force, Biff Brannon leads a day-to-day life and envisions his life in terms of “Broken pictures” lying “like a scattered jigsaw puzzle in his head” (The Heart, p. 202). Seeking to comprehend the reality and truth of life in terms of pieces and parts, he vitiates his vision and fails to lead a full-fledged and full-blooded life. His retreat from life which he senses as “the boundary of death” is a worse kind of spiritual isolation. It is, in fact, a life without life, a death-in-life or a spiritual death.

In the Alice - Biff relationship McCullers presents another picture of fractured bonds and ruptured ties. They have been married for ten years but living together for such a long period has not created any meaningful relationship between the two. Their relationship is sans affection, care and concern for each other. Taylor calls the two “psychological strangers.” Their established mode of addressing each other as “Mr” and “Mrs.” indicates how far they have drifted spiritually. The Biff-Alice relationship is a sad tale of a love-less life joined together by a soul-less custom. Biff’s lack of sexual identity or his sexual ambivalence and Alice’s diametrically opposed mental and spiritual get-up leads to estrangement between the two. McCullers, as her biographers also point out, had herself experienced sexual ambivalence in her life. How far sexual confusion in life can lead to spiritual isolation, the novelist knew by personal experience.
Gifted with a penetrating insight into the diverse forms of isolation, McCullers explores intellectual isolation in the story of Dr. Copeland, a black medical doctor, whose callous denial of the basic culture, the racial strains of his community and adoption of an intellectual and abstract stance toward it leads to his alienation. Strongly devoted to the welfare of the Negro race, he passionately commits himself to the concept of "strong true purpose"—a concept fettered by his love of the abstract and the intellectual. Portia with her intuitive perception understands the reason behind Copeland's alienation: "us talks like our mamma and her peoples and their peoples before them. You think out every thing in your brain. While us rather talk from something in our own hearts that has been there for a long time" (The Heart, p.67). Copeland's heart and mind are so soaked in his firmly-formulated and stubbornly-believed concept that he can no longer speak to his children in a communicable language. His wife also fails to understand him and leaves him to live with her parents. The blind pursuit of abstractions and the obsessive concern with his dream obstructs the fulfilment of his healthy, normal desires and also denies him the precious privilege of a happy, natural and relaxed fatherhood. It also makes him jeer at all those emotional bonds and spiritual props which make living a satisfying and fruitful experience: he detests the very mention of God, religion and emotions and dubs them as primitive.

In Jake Blount's situation, McCullers depicts the alienation experienced when affiliations with the integrating agencies like family and community are renounced and a person leans exclusively on such abstract props as the "gospel of labor" or truth of the social condition. The denial
of the stabilising influence of love in the early part of his life, limiting of the dynamics of life to mere trade-unionism and a rootless life conspire to make Blount's life isolated and truncated. Here is a life confined to the level of an exile, a stranger, an outcast. The inevitable consequence of the faulty perception of life is that Blount is forced into the position of an "Unrequited Lover, a frustrated quester." 

Most of the criticism of McCullers' The Heart highlights the isolation aspect of the work ignoring its affirmative facet. But a close study of the work reveals the presence of a positive note vouching for some hope and holding out an assurance, a possibility for the sense of belonging and relatedness. Through Mick Kelly's story, McCullers portrays one heroic effort where despite heavy obstacles and disappointments, there is a sort of affirmation and a desperate endeavour to locate some meaning in life. Here the novelist presents a healthy development from the world of isolated self into a world of social involvement.

Isolated by adolescence, denied warmth of parental love by parents too preoccupied in the soul-grinding business of making both ends meet, refused affection and understanding by young sisters, Mick searches a "good private place" (The Heart, p.45) for herself both in the physical and the metaphorical sense. As the novel progresses, Mick loses her 'places': she loses her friendship with her younger brother, George (Bubber), her "home-made God" (Singer) dies and the changed circumstances of her life forbid her entry into her "inside room." The fast deteriorating economic condition of her family forces her to take up job at a ten-cent store. These developments bring about loss of love in her life - a love symbolised by her
passion for music. A disquiet and uneasy Mick refuses to be mowed down by despair or anguish. Despite being “robbed of her freedom and energy by an unprincipled and wasteful society” (McCullers, “The Outline of the Mute,” Evans, p. 198) Mick retains a sane approach. By showing Mick’s mature and mellowed reaction to her plight and by depicting her desperate effort to place her condition in some normative context, McCullers hints at the possibility of meaning and significance in an otherwise bleak life. The novelist implies that spiritual isolation may be the ‘given’ condition of the modern man but the debilitating despair of isolation can be transcended by transmuting it into some meaningful experience.

McCullers’ vision of man’s spiritual isolation is not so bleak: it envisages love as the most potent anodyne to isolation. In her delineation of the human situation, the characters who last and endure are the characters who love and relate to others. What is significant is that their love is not warped but a normal, healthy and wholesome love, born out of genuine concern and deep sympathy for others. Loving kindness, care and concern for others, McCullers believes, constitutes the core of such a love. Moreover, love as envisaged by McCullers, is above colour and race. Through Portia, the coloured cook employed by Kellys, McCullers gives body and shape to this vision. Portia loves “generously, maternally, and uninhibitedly.” Transcending the role of cook, Portia mothers the Kelly children with unusual care and affection. Realising the financial difficulties of the Kelly family, Portia patiently waits for her wages. Portia’s concern for Mick, who is in the throes of adolescence, is cheering.
and gratifying. Her affection for her brother, her concern for her insecure husband and lonely father shows how liberally she loves and how generously she gives — an attitude which McCullers deems as palliative to isolation.

II

Reflections in a Golden Eye, like McCullers' first novel The Heart, presents a world submerged in spiritual isolation. Each man and woman in the novel exists in a state of isolation. Here McCullers presents a world stunted by the utter lack of moral dimensions and hence replete with isolation. In this Flaubertian novel "all relations fail: the relation of man to man and man to woman, of man to environment and woman to child. All communication is blocked, vitiated, or restricted." 11 Denying the totality and the immensity of life, fettered by their fears, fantasies and compulsions, the inhabitants of this world fail to live a meaningful, sane and healthy life. With their capacities in the realm of give and take crippled, these 'half-people' are reduced to the level of grotesquerie." 12 The world depicted in Reflections is a world steeped in animalism, denial of vital force, cowardice, perversion and self-hatred. It reminds us of the portrayal of the seven deadly sins in medieval art; it has been termed "a modern morality play." 13

In an essay "Aspects of the Southern philosophy," Richard M. Weaver discussing the Southern distrust of abstractionism remarks,
"The Southerner prefers to take in this whole through a kind of vision, in which the dominant features are a land... a spiritual community, a people inclined to be good humored even in the face of their eternal 'problems' and to adapt themselves to the broad rhythms of nature." In the same essay, the distinguished critic dwelling on Southern humanism comments, "And so in regard to his humanism, for man is something that can be perceived as a whole too; and it is a prevailing antipathy towards the specialist or the man of unshapely development which has kept the South humanistic." McCullers' Southern identity, soaked in Southern philosophy, apprehends spiritual isolation as the tragic fall-out when the age-old perceptions of life are flouted. McCullers perceives living as an enormous, intense, profound and multi-dimensional experience which requires expression and satisfaction of basic instincts like sexual instinct, companionship, motherhood, love and understanding. A full-fledged life, the novelist believes, is one which takes cognizance of the multi-faceted dimensions of life. Any attempt to reduce life to one of its components is to invite fragmentation, frustration and isolation.

McCullers depicts the frustrations of a life devoid of the galvanising force of sex through the life patterns of Captain Penderton and Alison Langdon. The hollowness of life, when lived purely on an animal level, to the complete exclusion of spirituality and intellect, is delineated through Major Langdon, Leonora Penderton and Elgee Williams. The two modes of life—intellectual, cultural and spiritual sans animality and vitality and animal and physical sans intellect and spirit—not only blatantly disregard the wholeness of life but also succeed in destroying life. The Pendertons'
relationship is not only marked by constant contention, bickerings and ridicule but lacks the very foundation upon which a lasting marriage, with its concomitant love and affection, rests. Penderton with his denial of nature and animality and Leonora Penderton with her sheer animality sans intellect are like two poles, who never meet. The Langdons' marriage runs the same course: Major Langdon with his lust, infidelity and philistine tendencies wrecks the life of his sensitive and artistic wife, driving her to death while Alison Langdon living in her own world of beauty, music and arts, cuts herself off from the realm of animality. Williams with all his love for nature and animality remains a brute who is incapable of relating to others. No significant communication exists between the people inhabiting this desolate and barren world.

In Reflections, McCullers portrays a world which by exempting itself from the fixed norms and values tears itself apart from a healthy and wholesome world. It is a world of chaos, confusion and anarchy. Except for some fleeting moments of harmony, all relationships are botched, disjointed and, therefore, unsatisfactory. By their erratic, inconsistent, compulsive and valueless approach toward life, the people living in this world make their lives not only fragmented but also distorted. By refusing to accept the natural order of life, the common pattern of living, they bring in a distorted vision of life. This vision “creates a universe without fundamental order or direction” and in this universe life devoid of moral direction becomes a nightmare. Unless leavened by the forces of love, understanding, sympathy and compassion, a universe as depicted in
Reflections, McCullers believes, will continue to plague the human life with the curse of spiritual isolation.

Even in a world ruled and swayed by the forces of isolation and loneliness, as depicted in Reflections, McCullers does not fully yield to pessimism. No doubt the world depicted here is stark and bare but then there are some relationships which are meaningful and some situations which provide opportunities to satisfy the need to relate to each other. One such relationship is between Alison, Lieutenant Weincheck and Anacleto. The three make a happy trio and their relationship is marked by understanding, sympathy and tenderness. Anacleto’s identification with Alison is complete: her joys are his joys and her sorrows are his sorrows. Similarly, Alison cares and feels concerned for Lieutenant Weincheck. The two share quiet moments enjoying music, concerts and operas. The attachment between the two is not only reciprocal but also very strong. Here one can point out that the sexual attachment between Leonora and Major Langdon is also quite a successful relationship. But this relationship, based as it is only on sensual gratification, is not a serene, satisfactory and adequate relationship. Lacking the sanctity and glory of spiritual communion, this relationship does not progress beyond the “mere mating of animals.” Confined to the level of “the stud and his mate,” it becomes an agent of spiritual isolation, torture and suffering. In contrast to it is the relationship between Alison and Anacleto and between Alison and Lieutenant Weincheck. These relationships hold some glimmer of hope and a lingering assurance in a loveless world but the major flaw in
these relationships is that they lack full access to the experience: the vitality and rejuvenating force of libido is missing in these relationships.

III

McCullers' *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* continues with the novelist's avowed theme of the spiritual isolation: love, as perceived in this novel, is not its mitigator but "its intensifier" (McDowell, Carson McCullers, p.71). Placing her story in a mythic, timeless realm where elemental passion and violence hold the sway, the author depicts a quirky amazon's love for a hunch-back and its tragic end. Elevating the whole situation and the characters to metaphors, McCullers succeeds in giving a figurative expression to the human situation of spiritual isolation.

In her first novel *The Heart* McCullers delineates the world of spiritually isolated people who seek release from this state through love. The characters in this novel feel the benign influence of love, though for a limited time only. In *Reflections* the lack of genuine love and dominance of lust manifests itself in the vortex of sadism, masochism, self-hatred and violence. The ambiguities of love manifest themselves in different and diverse ways, neurotic and destructive for most of the time. But in *The Ballad* McCullers' vision of the human isolation and the role of love in containing isolation assumes complexities. Here the lover-beloved dichotomy is complete: "There are the lover and the beloved, but these two come from different countries... The beloved fears and hates the
lover, and with the best of reasons... for the lover is forever trying to strip bare his beloved" (The Ballad, p. 27). The author's vision grows sombre and dismal. “Now the obstacle is much more serious, so serious as to be in fact insurmountable: The beloved hates the lover... There is no longer even a possibility of escape.”19 Love, here, is not a redeemer of isolation but its re-inforcer: it becomes “a force which drives the lover into deeper isolation by driving him in on himself” (McDowell, p.71).

The Ballad delineates the terrifying incertitude, dilemma and the precariousness of love. Through the Gothic dimensions of her art, the novelist lays bare the irrational and inexplicable patterns of human behaviour and the wayward working of the machinery of love. “In this novel McCullers explores such themes as sexual ambivalence, destructive infatuation, the pain of being rejected by the beloved, the problematical configurations implied in any love triangle, and the paradoxical closeness of love and hate” (McDowell, p.71).

Amelia, an amazon, and the richest woman of the town, a solitary soul, marries a handsome weaver Marvin Macy, who renounces his criminal tendencies under the benign influence of his love for Amelia but Amelia refuses to consummate her marriage with Macy and throws him out of her house. Years later she falls in love with a hunch-back and to celebrate the arrival of love in her life, transforms her dry goods store into a café, a place for spiritual communication and affirmation of the vitality of give and take. The hunch-back, however, falls in love with Marvin Macy, destroys the café and disappears for ever, leaving the pining Amelia alone.
who after an agonising wait for the beloved's return shuts herself in the dilapidated building, once a café, now a desolate and dreary place.

McCullers believes love to be a very potent force. Its absence can act as a stumbling block to the normal and healthy development of the personality while its presence can refine and enoble even the hardened criminals. The novelist embodies this view of love in Marvin Macy's story. By depicting how the denial of parental love, especially, during the formative and the infantile stage of human life, can warp the personality and how love's appearance can re-shape the distorted and twisted personality into a wholesome and normal one, McCullers underscores the beneficial influence of love. The novelist embodies the liberating and the expanding virtues of love through Amelia's love for the hunch-back wherein a stingy, dour and stand-offish Amelia changes into a generous, pleasant and communicative person and finally love's benevolent aspect manifests itself in the whole communal life by transforming the dull, dreary town into a place of cheer, animation and vivacity, thereby, linking Eros to Agapé.

The emergence of the café is not a mere physical or material change: by bringing it into existence McCullers denotes the profound changes touching the spiritual and the inner life of the people of the town. The café is an “archetypal place of renewal” where people mix together and socialise. They experience certain moments of “freedom and illicit gladness” (The Ballad, p.21) and here “the deep bitter knowing that you are not worth much in this world could be laid low” (p. 55). The novelist here focusses on the spiritual significance of communication and
reciprocity in relationship. The café takes away the ennui and loathing of a life characterised by the same, unvaried routine of a mechanical life. For the people of the town it is like a fresh, cool breeze providing relief from the oppressive confines of selfhood, isolation, drudgery and awareness of damnation. The place is a kind of refuge, a “sanctuary from dullness” (Dawson F Gaillard, p. 422) where people forget the agonising realisation of “the cheapness of human life” (The Ballad p. 55) and for Amelia it is a kind of nursery school where she learns to be a companionable person taking her first lessons in the comradeship and fellowship in community. For some time Eros and Agapé seem to work in accord and harmony but they only seem to, for the main figures with their “challenging complexities” (McDowell, p.73) fail to sustain this world.

McCullers implies that human perversions and man’s tendency to slight and spurn the fundamental and cardinal principles of life leads to the collapse of the world of communication and social intercourse. People inhabiting the world of The Ballad ruthlessly flout the fundamental and the natural order and fall victims to the dark and crippling forces of isolation. Amelia’s vehement and relentless negation of her sexual identity leads her from a world of fellowship, companionship and human warmth into a dilapidated, boarded and empty house where she is condemned to an eternal but futile wait for the treacherous lover.

Some situations and events in the novel by implication show that spiritual isolation and loneliness in life can be alleviated by relating to others, by affirming faith in fellowship, by maintaining what D.H. Lawrence calls a living contact, the give and take of human relations.21 In
the formation of the café, McCullers presents one such juncture. R.M. Cook is of the view that the true subject of The Ballad is not the energising force of Amelia’s love for cousin Lymon but the café itself. Cook makes an exaggeration of a truth yet the fact remains that the café symbolises “transcendent affirmation” of a shared life.

It is not only in the warm, animating and shared moments of life at the café that McCullers sounds a note of affirmation and hints at a way out of the state of spiritual isolation. The epilogue entitled “The Twelve Mortal Men” which as Ihab Hassan suggests speaks out its hidden refrain also sounds a note of assurance. It is an unmistakably positive but symbolic declaration of the possible joy and the sunshine the state of togetherness can bring. Through the twelve mortal men of the chain gang, the novelist suggests that the world she delineates is not of complete defeatism. Here one tends to disagree with the view that all “hope is gone; awe finds no inspiration.” The twelve mortal men of the chain gang in the novel represent mankind and the human plight. Human beings are caught and bound together “by the chains of circumstance and necessity.” Despite their singing together, they are unable to reach a harmony which transcends their individuality. Nevertheless, they do achieve a momentary harmony of the individual voices when singing together. “Trapped in the cruelest and most hopeless of physical conditions, the prisoners display an elemental capacity for joy that transcends and changes, if only for a moment, the miserable conditions of their lives. . . . the music ‘intricately blended, both somber and joyful’ rises
from the chain gang at their endless labor - a joy apart, celebrating the fact they are men together" (R.M. Cook, Carson McCullers, p. 100).

The predominant note which usually goes unnoticed in the critical studies of this novel is the supremacy of the Agapé over Eros. As depicted in the lives of the main characters of this novel, Eros emerges as a ruinous, all-destroying and all-devouring force. Passion in the lives of Marvin Macy, Amelia and cousin Lymon dissipates and devastates their beings. Passionate love, McCullers implies, is destructive while communal affection by its powers of renewal, regeneration and resurrection can create a cosmos where the bonds of love can be strong and lasting. This is not to say that in Agapé McCullers finds an august affirmation of life. She is too keenly aware of the ironies, ambiguities and complexities of life and too perceptive to the dark forces operating in the human heart to find a total and unqualified affirmation in any one kind of love. What McCullers implies is that Agapé is an improvement, an emendation on Eros. This explains why the novelist does not enlarge upon the element of Agapé in the novel. Here the "suggestion of Agapé is at best minimal, and appears only in the brief and uncertain pleasure the villagers enjoy at the café" (McDowell, Carson McCullers, p.70). Though the sense of togetherness provided by Agapé is short-lived and there is no profound and pervasive realisation of Agapé but by implication this manifestation of love is better as it is sans the destructive and mutilating powers of Eros.
IV

In The Member of The Wedding, McCullers depicts spiritual isolation not through some physical deformation but through adolescence. In her search for the representative states signifying human loneliness, the novelist seems to have found in adolescence a powerful and expressive symbol. Adolescence by its very nature lends itself profitably to the motif of isolation. In adolescence "the sense of isolation is very strong: one is no longer a child nor yet an adult. . . . Adolescents do not belong anywhere, and thus constitute excellent symbols of spiritual loneliness."  

Here it may be mentioned that in The Member, McCullers takes up adolescence to delineate the problem of loneliness, the uncertainties of identity and mingles it with the amorphous confusion and perplexities of the adolescence. But the work is not a study of tortuous and turbulent adolescence as some critics believe it to be. It has been described as "an amusing, often touching study of late adolescent psychology." Adolescence has been termed as the exclusive theme of the novel. The work has also been called a novel of growing up and initiation. There is no denying the fact that the novel delineates the experience and the interior life of an adolescent girl in the throes of growth and maturity. But adolescence here provides the back-drop for the portrayal of the author’s vision: it is the "general area of experience described" (R. M. Cook, p.60) and not the theme itself. A deceptive piece of writing, it can mislead a naive reader into believing that it is a study of the upheaval of adolescence. Making Frankie the fulcrum of the problem of human isolation, McCullers focusses on a theme "elementary . . . common to all age levels . . . [that of ] human loneliness: the basic problem which Virginia
Woolf, after years of investigation, could only state in terms of 'here is one room, there another'.

Isolated by adolescence, haunted by a sense of separateness from those immediately near to her, tortured by the lack of identity, the protagonist of the story, Frankie, seeks the 'we' of her 'I'. By becoming the third member of her brother's wedding, she seeks an end to her isolation and her search for her identity. “The agonies of growth, the search for identity, the paradoxical desire to escape, to experience, to belong suddenly converge on Frankie on the occasion of her brother's wedding, which becomes the intolerable symbol of all her longings.”

By showing the relentless struggle to become “joined” terminating in an identification with wedding, McCullers depicts the wayward workings of the human heart. In her search for the panacea to all her ills, a specific restorative to the scourge of her isolation, Frankie settles for such an abstract object as a wedding. It is “wedding as idea rather than as particular event” that is sought after as a means of spiritual liberation.

“The wedding was bright and beautiful as snow,” (The Member, p.15) confirms the view that wedding remains confined to the conceptual level. Here McCullers seems to suggest that when human beings, disregarding the solid and substantial associations and bonds of human life, find the most satisfying image of kinship with the world in such an abstract object as wedding, they will their own isolation. McCullers implies that any effort to seek meaning, cohesion and fulfilment in life, through alliance or affinity with those aspects of life which are not rooted in the real and the concrete, is bound to breed frustration and the consequent isolation. Like
Blount's Marxism, Copeland's "strong true purpose" and Mick's "inside room", the wedding proves a delusory symbol of love: the novelist's comments about wedding like "wedding was unmanaged as a nightmare" (p.135), "the wrecked wedding" (p.135), "the wedding was like a dream outside her own power, or like a show unmanaged by her in which she was supposed to have no part" (p. 138) and "The wedding was all wrong" (p.136) portray not only the protagonist's reaction to the shattering of her dream but also the novelist's attempt to portray the reality of fact against the reality of dream.

With her "Alice in Wonderland logic,"34 Frankie makes the wedding the repository of her 'we-hood', the symbol of her relationship with others and an antidote to her state of isolation. In doing so she experiences "a new unnamable connection" (p.50) even with the strangers. Like a seer in a trance, she feels her soul expanding, soaring high to nourish cosmic love - a kind of love of the 'we' of humanity and not the 'I' of an individual or a particular person. But the novelist does not allow this seer-like vision to last long as its very foundations are unsubstantial, imaginary and divorced from reality. Based on such an illusion as the trinity of a wedding, the much-sought and long-cherished dream is bound to end in dismal failure. In juxtaposition to it is Frankie's friendship and involvement with Mary Littlejohn her "most intimate friend" (p.151) which takes place some time after the agonising and obnoxious experience of the wedding. Here McCullers inducts society and community as a means of man's inclusion, integration and the fulfilment of the sense of belonging. The novelist implies that it is in solid, substantial and concrete
relationships that man can satisfy his basic urge of spiritual and emotional integration.

McCullers' picture of society and community as integrating forces is a qualified one which is exemplified in Frances' relationship with Mary Littlejohn. In relating to Mary Littlejohn Frances becomes impervious to others around her and displays very little sorrow over Berenice's departure or at John Henry's death. Love in McCullers' vision can never be complete and full-fledged. By showing that Frankie cannot go with Jarvis and Janice and be perfectly joined with them and by depicting her settling for compromise with a new friend, McCullers implies that man is morally obliged to accept reality though it may be imperfect and the second-best.

McCullers endows the novel with a thematic richness. The power of love to liberate man from the agony and anguish of loneliness and the failure of this love to last long enough, is given a poetic and poignant touch in Berenice's story. However, the novelist introduces certain variations in the manifestation of isolation motif in Berenice's story. There is a streak of the existential alienation too: "We all of us somehow caught ... I born Berenice. You born Frankie. John Henry born John Henry. And may be we wants to widen and bust free. But no matter what we do we still caught. Me is me and you is you and he is he. We each one of us somehow caught all by ourselves" (p. 113).

In Berenice's perfect marriage to Ludie, McCullers portrays an ideal love - a love terminated by nature's calamity, death. This love based as it is on give and take becomes a wholesome and healthy experience
providing genuine happiness and spiritual anchor. By making Berenice utter “when I was with Ludie, I didn’t feel so caught,” (p. 114) the novelist underscores the role of love as the redeemer and mitigator of human isolation.

McCullers also brings to focus the isolation thrust on man by his artificially created divisions and stubbornly believed prejudices, like race and colour. Berenice’s suffering does not spring up merely from the loss of love in her life but also from the hurt and pain of segregation and denial of communion in community. “Everybody is caught one way or another. But they done drawn completely extra bounds around all colored people. They done squeezed us off in one corner by ourself,” (p.114) comments Berenice. The intensity of her isolation on account of her race can be felt by implication when Berenice assumes the role of “The Holy Lord God Berenice”: “But the world of the Holy Lord God Berenice Sadie Brown... was round and just and reasonable... There would be no colored people and no white people to make the colored people feel cheap and sorry all through their lives. No colored people, but all human men and ladies and children as one loving family on the earth” (p. 91).

Through John Henry, the third spoke of the novel, McCullers provides us with a thematic parallel of the human isolation embodied in Frankie and Berenice. McCullers depicts a different kind of isolation through this child - an impregnable isolation, which defies all efforts at communication. McCullers symbolises this perception of isolation by making John Henry more of a quiet listener than a speaker in the talking sessions at the kitchen and by leaving his questions (which are sparingly
asked) unanswered. John Henry's isolation reaches its climax in his abrupt tragic and shocking death. To Wikborg, it is John Henry's sorrowful little figure that conveys "most poignantly the theme of man's struggle to break through the walls of his loneliness."

To Paul West, it exemplifies "a cosmic obscenity far worse than any human depravity."

Paul West believes that whereas humans' violations of others' privacies and intimacies spring up from a genuine, aspiring love which sometimes backfires, in John Henry's dying voicelessly of meningitis on "a golden morning of the most butterflies, the clearest sky," (p.152) the universe violates the human beings using love without evincing love. In other words in the stunning death of John Henry, the novelist manifests the callous and inhuman cosmic force thoroughly indifferent to human welfare. To Evans, John Henry's death "emphasises the sense of universal meaninglessness and chaos" which he sees as dominating the novel (Carson McCullers, p. 106).

In The Member McCullers shows us a way out of isolation by implication. She seems to suggest that it is by relating to others, by rooting one's self in the society that one can make life meaningful and fruitful. McCullers also implies that a feeling concern for others and a certain stoicism and courage is essential to escape the blight of fragmentation, frustration and the consequent isolation. In Berenice's refusal to deflect from the basic sound attitude toward life, despite severe struggles, in her infinite and intense capacity to relate, to belong, to love (manifested in her diverse roles as an affectionate and caring mother to the semi-orphaned Frankie, as a careworn grief-stricken sister desperately trying to be of some
help to her foster-brother, Honey and as a devoted lover of Ludie Freeman), McCullers shows her faith in love and mutual relationship.

V

Thematically McCullers' last novel Clock Without Hands is a bold and ambitious enterprise. Its main and predominant theme is the search for identity in the flux of time or "the self's changing identity in time" (R.M. Cook, p. 106). But yoked to this primary theme are McCullers' social and racial concerns. Racial antagonism, political controversy, class differences, and barriers between generations are all issues explored in this novel but these issues are investigated as enclosures enveloping people into oppressive loneliness and agonising isolation and are portrayed as "realities, which magnify loneliness, isolation, and internal conflict" (McDowell, p.115).

In this novel, McCullers perceives time as a powerful force, the flux of which poses a challenge to one's identity. The novelist here "demonstrates that time can cause the unjoining of adults as well as adolescents and that real maturity . . . may only be gained by facing death" (R.M. Cook, p. 106). The novelist inducts the other themes which have always formed a part of her work, themes such as the failure of love, the moral suffering of the isolated freak and the suffering inflicted by racial and social injustice. In the figure of Malone, McCullers shows the alienation of a dying man. A dying person is insulated from the living: the shadow of approaching death stands like an unbreakable wall between the alive and the dying.
Malone feels “surrounded by a zone of loneliness” (p.8) and fails to find relief in religion and Church.

McCullers implies that the loneliness and extreme moral suffering of a person facing death can be alleviated by facing the existential dilemma. Man can find order, sense and meaning in “a world of incongruities in which there was no order or conceivable design” (Clock p. 9) and can assert his identity through engagement and choice. This vision is clothed in dramatic shape in Malone’s refusal to go along with his friend, Judge Clane, to bomb a black who moves into a white neighbourhood. Though branded as “chicken” and ridiculed yet he survives the greatest danger of losing his self. In achieving his identity, Malone no longer is tortured by the cramping emotion of isolation and loneliness; rather, he realises the significance of life, love and above all, the significance of his self and identity. Having realised his self, the town-druggist dies peacefully and “in dying living assumed order . . . that Malone had never known before . . . The design alone emerged” (p. 241).

With her Southern lineage, McCullers had seen how racial injustice, Southern culture and social system bred isolation in society. The novelist blasts such loudly-mouthed and blindly accepted notions about the institution of slavery as the “age-long standards,” the “noble-standards of the South” and “civilisation is founded on slavery.” McCullers exposes the masochistic orientation given to the practice of slavery in such twisted phrases as “a state of happy peonage” (p. 163). She comes out strongly against a value-scale which does not allow the blacks to be seen as full-blooded human beings, meeting their white counterparts on the
common platform of humanity. The novel also indicts the dispensation of justice along racial lines. It exposes the arbitrary approach towards the administration of justice which leans heavily on racial pride rather than legality or rationality as the criterion of justice. In the portrayal of Judge Clane, the author represents the racialism and the inhumanity of the old South. But the novelist intends more than that. She also explores and exposes the other flaws in human behaviour, attitudes, thinking and mental get up that obstruct one's emotional and spiritual integration. One such flaw, she perceives is, self-love. McCullers holds narcissism responsible for the pull away from family, society and community and the push toward one's own self. For a narcissist all persons and all objects, the author shows, are an extension of his self. The only comradeship and companionship a narcissist enjoys is that of his own self. Self-love is his inseparable companion – a trait which forces him to take refuge in illusions, evasiveness and escape from reality. McCullers embodies her implied criticism of life in Judge Clane's character. Corpulent in body, monstrous in complacency, an embodiment of “the worst kind of evil, flabby, shallow kind,” (McDowell, p.113) the Judge by violating the basic tenets of humanity and inflating his self-love elects his isolation.

Closely allied to McCullers' theme of spiritual isolation is her theme of identity and achievement of selfhood. Lack of identity can create a sense of isolation and for a sane and meaningful life achievement of identity is absolutely essential. In Clock McCullers shows how this urge can become a propelling force in one's life, especially for a mulatto, who can claim kinship neither with blacks nor with whites. In Sherman Pew's violent
assertion of identity through fatal conflict with society, McCullers implies her criticism of the Southern society which spurns the basic tenets of humanity and in doing so gives a fillip to racial bigotry, racial violence and inhumanity.

Clock, on the one hand embodies McCullers' criticism of Southern Society, while on the other hand, it is a passionate plea for a close understanding of the region and its community. The novelist implies that to have in-depth understanding of the South, one must assume a spiritual nearness to it. Distance, spiritual distance, is a great divider and blurs one's vision, "the community traces a harmonious and exact design only if the viewer is physically miles above it in a plane or spiritually distant, securely placed high up in the hierarchical social order of the South. To understand the South as it really is, one must renounce theories, abstractions, and prejudices and see people for what they are, rather than view them from a physical or psychic distance" (McDowell, p. 104).

McCullers, once commenting on this novel, said that the work is about the affirmation of the dignity of life. But the novel is not only about the affirmation of life but also about the affirmation of love, sympathy and compassion as a corrective to forces of hate, racial bigotry and violent destruction of life. By making Jester Clane abandon his plan to murder Sammy Lank and by making Clane perceptive to Sammy Lank's plight, the novelist allows love and compassion to prevail over hatred and intolerance. Jester after listening to Sammy Lank's story realises that witless and spiritually blind men like him fall prey to a society which instead of orienting their lives toward healthy, creative and meaningful
goals, anchors them to false and frustrating activities, turning them into "unwitting clown[s]." Such persons try to get some recognition, appreciation and even fame by making parenthood a sensational piece of news on one hand and violent destruction of life on the other hand. This realisation sows the tender seeds of compassion in Jester’s heart and he recoils from further violence. Through this abrupt and dramatic switch-over in Jester’s attitude and feelings, McCullers dwells upon the need to come closer and nearer to people so as to make relationships stable, sympathetic and firm. The novelist believes that when we view people from a distance we are most likely to miss their true innerselves and locate only their superficial or pseudo-selves. Like Biff Brannon’s “Swift radiance of illumination” which enables him to see “a glimpse of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time,” (The Heart, p. 306) Jester discovers that to love one must come closer for then only can one fathom the labyrinth of the human heart and the tangled skein of human emotions. The novelist projects this vision in a suggestive manner: “The whole earth from a great distance means less than one long look into a pair of human eyes” (Clock, p. 234).

In her last novel, McCullers accomplishes the rare feat of affirmation of the dignity of life and love. By endowing Jester with a firm grasp of both his self and society, McCullers underscores the significance of the individual as well as the society in the formation of an integrated personality. The vision, Jester is able to cull out from the circumstances and experiences of his life, is not a stunted, fragmented or truncated one:
it allows for the enlargement and expansion of the self to include the community and society. He decides to be a lawyer, like his father and work to set right the tilted balance of justice in the South by removing racial passion from it. This commitment of Jester, coupled with his capacity to “look long into the eyes” of individuals, is his way of the affirmation of life, integration of self and affection for mankind. By showing Jester's choices, McCullers makes her value-scale explicit and in doing so, she also proclaims her cure for the malady of spiritual isolation.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


5 Ibid.


10 Margaret B. McDowell, Carson McCullers (Boston: Tawyne, 1980), p. 34.


13 Dale Edmonds as quoted by Margaret B. McDowell in Carson McCullers, p. 45.


15 Ibid., pp. 16 - 17.

16 Margaret B. McDowell, p. 53.

17 Oliver Evans, The Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 70.

19 Oliver Evans, p. 131.


28 A.S. Knowles, p. 95.


30 Walter Allen, Tradition and Dream, p. 155.


35 Eleanor Wikborg, p. 20.