Chapter 4

'The Ingenuities of Aesthetics' -
The Grotesque, Violence, Irony
and humour.

In an essay "The Vision Shared" McCullers commented, "The ingenuities of aesthetics have never been my problems. Flight, in itself interests me and I am indifferent to salting the bird's tail." But McCullers was being modest here: her novels studied from the point of view of art reveal her possession of remarkable artistry as well as critical insight into the peculiar qualities of her fiction. McCullers' fiction clearly brings out how well she knew the kind of art her fiction required. Her art is a blend of the grotesque, violent and the ironic. McCullers' vision of the human condition necessitates the use of these elements. In fact it is her moral insight into the human situation that shapes, moulds and guides her aesthetics.

McCullers' work belongs to the Southern Gothic tradition. One comes across grotesque situations and events, oddities, bizarre elements and violence in her work. Like her contemporary Flannery O'Connor and Faulkner before her, she endeavours to present human isolation in dark and sombre hues and in the old forms of the Gothic and the grotesque, she finds new metaphors for the portrayal of the human condition. The basic traits of the grotesque, "the mixture of heterogenous elements, the confusion, the fantastic quality and even a kind of alienation from the
world are quite evident in the world of McCullers’ fiction. But McCullers does not employ the Gothic and the grotesque for any sensational effects. As Gossett along with several other critics points out McCullers uses grotesque to underscore all that is problematic in human relations (p.168).

McCullers makes a liberal use of recurrent irony and humour in her works. Ihab Hassan is of the view that the true nature of the modern hero’s existential encounter with experience can be most accurately described by referring to the assumptions of irony as they operate in modern fiction. Northrop Frye in his Anatomy of Criticism has pointed out the gainful employment of irony in recent fiction. McCullers, too, relies heavily on the use of irony in her fiction, chiefly to underscore the complexities and incongruities of the situations and also to highlight the discrepancy between the appearance of a situation and the reality that underlies it. Through an ironic mode of narration, the novelist succeeds in capturing an intense and stark realism which facilitates the projection of her perception of the human life. Humour occupies a significant place in McCullers’ art. She employs humour for character revelation, foreshadowing, plot-development and satirical commentary on society.

II

Carson McCullers’ work abounds in grotesque elements. We come across grotesque characters and grotesque incidents. In her first novel, The Heart is a Lonely Hunter, the central figure is a deaf-mute named John Singer passionately attached to another grotesque, a fat retarded Greek, who is also a mute. The Greek, Spiros Antonopoulos, is a cretin
but for Singer he is the embodiment of wisdom, love and understanding. “He sat tranquil and unmoving. His round face was inscrutable. His mouth was wise and smiling. And his eyes were profound. He watched the things that were said to him and in his wisdom he understood” (p. 173). Biff Brannon, the Café proprietor seems a normal, healthy and ordinary human being to look at but he, too, lives with a handicap: he is an impotent who also exhibits feminine traits. Biff also displays a special fondness for the freaks. His avidity for details borders on the grotesque. Jake Blount is not exactly a freak but there is something freakish about him. As Biff shrewdly observes about him: “it was like something was deformed about him - but when you looked at him closely each part of him was normal as ought to be” (pp. 16-17). With his penetrating vision, Biff locates the crux of Jake’s problem: “Therefore, if this difference was not in the body it was probably in the mind” (p. 17). Jake Blount’s mind, of course, is different from others but even the physical aspect of his personality, not the biological structure, but the total impression of it which includes the psychic aspect betrays abnormality. Another grotesque figure we come across in The Heart is Mr. Simms, an old deranged person with eyes bright and crazy. A religious maniac, he is given to hallucinations and preaches to crowds from a soapbox with the Bible in his hands. He talks of the second coming of Christ and takes upon himself the task of leading people to spiritual enlightenment.

The element of grotesque is so pervasive in McCullers’ second novel Reflections in A Golden Eye that Oliver Evans is constrained to remark, “it is this book which for better or for worse, earned for its
author the label of Gothic" (Carson McCullers, p. 80). In fact, some critics scandalised by the presence of so many characters and situations seeped in grotesquerie, have levelled the charge of heartlessness against the novel.⁵

Leonora Penderton, the voluptuous wife of Captain Penderton, is an animal who whiles away her time riding her horse Firebird, eating sumptuous turkey dinners and making love with great abandon to Major Langdon, her husband’s colleague. She miserably lacks her share of intelligence. Writing a thank-you note and doing a simple sum of multiplication is an agonising and exhausting job for her. She is given to the habit of prancing naked in her house: “She pulled off her jersey, crushed it into a ball, and threw it into the corner of the room. Then deliberately she unbuttoned her breeches and stepped out of them. In a moment she was standing naked by the hearth. Before the bright gold and orange light of the fire her body was magnificent. . . . The front door was open and from the dark night outside a breeze blew in and lifted a loose strand of her bronze hair” (p. 14-15). Leonora’s insularity from social, ethical and religious aspects of life is so complete that she emerges as a grotesque figure.

An insensitive brute, bereft of all values cherished by a healthy normal person, Major Langdon is another link in the chain of grotesque characters in Reflections. Like Leonora, Major Langdon lives on the animal level only and detests all expressions of culture and art. His intellectual calibre is shockingly meagre. Captain Penderton seems to be the most grotesque among the various figures paraded by the novelist in
Reflections. He is an impotent homosexual sado-masochist, a fetishist and a drug-addict. Abnormalities have been piled upon in his personality in a ruthless manner. Many of the actions which he performs with a natural ease shock the reader by their grotesquerie like stuffing a little kitten into a freezing mail-box and stealing silver spoons and hiding them in his truss box.

Private Williams is a deviate. An essentially solitary person, he believes all women carry disease and any contact with them can be infectious. He derives an unnatural pleasure from his contact with animals. Fond of strolls in the forests, Williams sometimes takes a certain horse from the stables with him in the afternoon, lets the horse go free while he himself lies naked soaking sun with “a sensual, savage smile on his lips” (p. 60).

The mind of Williams is a void untouched by social, moral and ethical considerations which reduces him to the level of the grotesque. The emotion of fear is also an unknown and non-existent element for him. In an argument over a wheel barrow of manure he had stabbed a Negro to death without any qualms of conscience: “He had felt a certain wondering, numb distress, but there was no fear in him, and not once since that time had the thought shaped definitely in his mind that he was a murderer” (p. 100). McCullers imparts certain touches of grotesque to the character of Alison Langdon who cuts off the nipples of her breasts with the garden shears in a bid to repudiate her sex.
The Ballad of the Sad Café is composed of such divergent and disparate material that it has been labelled as McCullers' “most daring excursion into the contradictory and the grotesque” (Cook, Carson McCullers, p. 100). There is profusion of contradictory elements - comic, tragic, ugly, drab and bizarre. Miss Amelia, the protagonist of the novella, is an amazon with several such personality traits which make her a grotesque: “She was a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man. Her hair was cut short and brushed back from the forehead, and there was about her sunburned face a tense, haggard quality” (p. 4). An essentially solitary person, Amelia’s contacts with people are limited to money-transactions otherwise she shuns people like plague: “It was only with people that Miss Amelia was not at ease. People, unless they are nilly-willy or very sick, cannot be taken into the hands and changed overnight to something more worth-while and profitable” (p.5). Miss Amelia keeps her kith and kin at bay though she has only a few of them and all efforts by other people to work out some kind of far-fetched connection with her end in fiasco. An amazon’s falling in love with a hunchbacked dwarf is as grotesque as it could be. Oliver Evans finds Cousin Lymon’s relationship with the man-like Amelia one of the “saddest and most grotesque situations in modern fiction” (Carson McCullers, p. 130).

Cousin Lymon is also a grotesque character. He is a hunchback, dwarf, tubercular and a homosexual. It is difficult to place him in any recognisable category. At times, he is like a child and at other moments he behaves like a very shrewd and calculating person. Yet another side of
his personality presents him as a mean, treacherous and devilish being. Lymon's essence cannot be captured in any regular categorisation.

In *Clock without Hands* McCullers seeks to represent the Southern dilemma by granting symbolic roles to the characters. Each character is there to represent a certain aspect of the Southern society. The novelist's main concerns in the novel are social though McCullers does delineate the inner lives of the characters. Therefore, we do not find McCullers resorting to the frequent use of grotesque in this novel.

In addition to grotesque characters, we also come across several grotesque situations and incidents in McCullers' works. In *The Heart* the four focal characters focus in on John Singer seeking love and understanding. The person they choose for it is a deaf-mute! At his wife's funeral, Biff Brannon inquires from the undertaker of the funeral home, "And what is the percentage of cremations in your business?" (p. 105). Then out on the street Biff stops to get his watch repaired and asks Kelly to explain the exact use of jewels in a watch. Biff's behaviour as a person who has lost his life companion is queer and abnormal. Instead of the emotions of shock, grief and anguish, we find Biff his usual self, bubbling with curiosity and eager to stuff himself with facts and figures. Lucile Wilson marries the same person twice despite the misery it entails. Singer washes the ash-tray and the glass he has used before pumping a bullet in his chest.

In *Reflections* the narrative is littered with grotesque situations and incidents like the Captain's intense agitation at Private's cutting
down the sweeping boughs of an Oak tree: Private Williams getting himself examined once a month by the doctor to see if he is free from the deadly disease that "made men blind, crippled and doomed to hell" (p. 20): Langdon's brief, morbid emotional attachment to Leonora, the woman who steals her husband and causes her immense misery: The Captain's act of killing Williams, the very person with whom he craves to have some relationship but to crown all the grotesque actions is Alison Langdon's cutting off the tender nipples of her breasts with garden shears (p. 151). Here, as Robert M. Rechnitz aptly remarks, "the grotesque quality results from the fusion of the horribly brutal act, magnified and made more painful by the awkward shears" ("The Failure of Love: The Grotesque in Two Novels by Carson McCullers," p. 454).

In The Member of the Wedding McCullers refrains from using grotesque elements frequently. Only sparingly does the novelist have recourse to it like Frankie's fear of turning into a freak and Berenice's preference for blue glass eye to replace the eye gouged out by her husband and her futile bids to repeat herself and Ludie by marrying strangers, total strangers, for their coats and thumbs.

In The Ballad of the Sad Café McCullers employs several grotesque incidents and situations to reveal the deeper and hidden
truths like Amelia’s queer behaviour on her wedding night when she treats her husband with the indifference shown to a customer: Amelia’s thrashing and the subsequent throwing out of her husband, “He was trying to tell her something, but before he could open his mouth she had swung once with her fist and hit his face so hard that he was thrown back against the wall and one of his front teeth was broken” (p.32): Amelia’s cutting up Marvin Macy’s klansman’s robe to cover her tobacco plants: Cousin Lymon scrambling on Amelia’s back while passing through the bog and holding on to her ears: Amelia setting her kidney stones as ornaments in a watch chain: the living together of the three under one roof: the grotesque fight between Amelia and Marvin Macy and finally Amelia, with her sexless and white face and two gray crossed eyes lingering at the window of her boarded up premises.

In Clock Without Hands, McCullers once again uses grotesque very frugally like Judge Clane’s being pleased with the smell of his faeces and his organising a lynching party to bomb his precious “jewel” Sherman Pew.

Many other Southern novelists like Flannery O’Connor, Eudora Welty and Truman Capote resort to the use of grotesque in their works. Miss O’Connor uses her grotesques to highlight the inner, moral flaws of the community. As Louis D. Rubin points out O’Connor employs the grotesque to “comment upon the moral and spiritual evasions of the supposedly ‘normal’ community” and that their “apparent grotesqueness is actually spiritual consistency: the true freakishness is the secular materialism of the every day, which Miss O’Connor felt was spiritually
But in McCullers' work, the grotesque is employed to suggest the human condition itself. In McCullers' fictional world it is not that "freaks are commentaries or criticism on normality; they are normality. Their physical grotesquery merely makes visible and identifiable their isolation and anguish."  

Truman Capote also makes use of grotesque in his works. Whereas McCullers employs grotesques and freaks as emblems for her portraiture of the human plight, Truman Capote seeks to represent no such broad, comprehensive and collective human state. His grotesques portray a particular individual and exclusive world. In Truman Capote's Gothic stories we have characters who are lonely and unloved and who get imprisoned with ugly and grotesque creatures whom they are unable to escape as these grotesques represent the primary selves of the alienated characters. In the words of Mark Schorer, McCullers seems to view grotesques "as representatives of the human race whereas for Capote they are exemplars of the private world within the world at large, and of a private view." Comparing the use of grotesque in Southern writing, Jane Hart finds other Southern writers, including Eudora Welty and Truman Capote, capitalising upon the interest created simply by difference and delving into "strange creatures with artistic and precise surgery" but Carson McCullers to this distinguished critic seems to have been concerned "with a larger vision—in which the abnormal figures, it is true, but with a functional purpose, not simply to gain from the instinctive, primitive quickening we have for things strange or perverted."
III

Violence forms an integral ingredient of McCullers' fiction. The prevalence of violence is intimately connected with the theme of her novels. Love in all its multifarious forms with its attendant joy, sorrow, gaiety and misery constitutes the theme of McCullers' works. Most of McCullers' characters, despite their desperate efforts to form some vitalising relationship with others are driven back to the agony and anguish of loneliness. An inevitable consequence of frustration in love is violence.

Sometimes, violence can lead to the absolute isolation of characters. In *The Heart* Bubber Kelly's accidental shooting of Baby Wilson leads to his total withdrawal from the circle of his family and friends. In a childish display of terrorism, Mick who wants to keep Bubber dependent upon her, scares the already scared child by telling him, "They got little electric chairs there - just your size. And when they turn on the juice you just fry up like a piece of burnt bacon. Then you go to Hell" (p. 144). To Bubber, Mick's behaviour represents a betrayal because she uses his violence as a weapon against him. Bubber Kelly is a changed person after this experience: gone are his youthful ways and he remains wrapped in himself, refusing to communicate even with his near and dear ones. Here, McCullers reveals the repercussions of violence upon a sensitive personality in a superb manner. "The sickening sweep into the oblivion of complete isolation is one of the constituents of violence which Mrs.
McCullers portrays with special effectiveness.” (Gossett; Violence in Recent Southern fiction, p. 162-163).

In McCullers’ work, violence is not confined to the personal and individual world only. Unlike the other writers of her group, McCullers exposes a very unpleasant aspect of violence in the social structure of the South. She lays bare the discordant elements in the relationship between the blacks and the whites and between the blacks themselves with the violence that ensues from these relationships. In Dr. Copeland’s story, McCullers shows the difficulties, an educated and enlightened Negro, has to face in leading a life of self-respect. The denial of such a life and the frustration out of this denial leads to violence: “The hopeless suffering of his people made in him a madness, a wild and evil feeling of destruction. At times he drank strong liquor and beat his head against the floor. In his heart there was savage violence, and once he grasped the poker from the hearth and struck down his wife” (p. 122). McCullers also shows the use of violence by the whites against the blacks. The whites in a bid to subjugate the blacks, to force them into submission, resort to violence. In The Heart, Willie is locked in an ice locker room by the guards. When Willie’s feet freeze they are amputated. Dr. Copeland is beaten and sent to jail when he asserts himself and refuses to play uncle.

We also find McCullers using violence to assail the social structure and social institutions, especially, in The Heart. With a burning intensity and passion Jake Blount nourishes a dream: the betterment of the workers through labour agitation. Incapable of translating his precepts into practice, he resorts to violent behaviour. When drunk and frustrated, he
beats his head against a wall and when amused he laughs like a maniac. "But Jake still laughed. There was something maniacal in the sound of his laughter" (p. 133). Once in the early hours of morning, drunk and frustrated at the failure of his goal, Jake almost precipitates a brawl by shouting at the workers who were ready to beat him to pulp had not Jake saved himself by throwing empty bottles on the windowsill and jumping from the window into a side street. On several occasions, Jake is seen indulging in violent behaviour but even when he is not engaged in violence, his noisy behaviour and acrimonious talk creates an impression of violence.

When the tension between relationships whether personal or that of the community reaches its peak, violence inevitably breaks out. In The Heart we find both personal relationships as well as those of the community going sour, hence the violence. There is mad, senseless violence - Jake finds the body of a murdered Negro; there is general violence - on his job at the Sunny Dixie show, he notices frequent fights and quarrels; there is racial violence "The Negroes were fighting the white men and the white men were fighting the Negroes. The white boy who had picked the fight seemed a kind of leader... The Negroes fought back as best they could" (p.289).

McCullers' characters dread the prospect of isolation. To ward off the sense of isolation, they adopt different defence mechanisms. In The Heart, the protagonist, John Singer resorts to suicide as an antidote to the crippling sickness of loneliness. A quick, sleek and violent death is the panacea to Singer's illness. In his violent death, a death which
generates violent emotions in the characters, who had rallied around him for spiritual strength, Singer reveals the supremacy he assigns to his friendship with Antonapoulos.

Violence there is in plenty in McCullers’ second novel, Reflections In a Golden Eye. Captain Penderton’s efforts to wriggle out of the shell of isolation end in violence. His ride on Firebird is one such effort. This ride which he finds both elevating and terrifying distills violence. Smeared with blood with a rash erupting on his face and neck, Penderton beats Firebird bloody with a stick and falls to the ground in a fit of weeping: “Slowly and methodically he tied the horse to a tree. He broke off a long switch, and with the last of his spent strength he began to beat the horse savagely... The Captain kept on beating him” (p. 77).

The fear of loneliness draws violent reactions in Penderton. While trying to forge relationship with Private Williams, Penderton relies upon violence as a means to attract the Private’s attention. He desperately wishes to shout at Williams, strike him or get him court-martialled: “His mind swarmed with a dozen cunning schemes by which he could make the soldier suffer” (p. 80). The affair ends in violence: finding Williams squatting by his wife’s bed-side in his house, the Captain fires two bullets through William’s chest. “The Captain was a good marks-man, and although he shot twice only one raw hole was left in the center of the soldier’s chest” (p. 139-140).
Violence asserts itself strongly in the life of Williams. A violent streak can be easily discerned in his personality. In a bout of anger, he once killed a Negro and dumped his body in an abandoned quarry. His initial, mute yearnings for Leonora also find expression in violent actions: “During the past two weeks he had stayed in the barracks every night, and had stirred up much trouble. This was a new side of his personality that his barrack mates had not suspected” (p. 134). On one occasion he picks up a fight over the use of a commode in latrine and “was soundly beaten and his head was banged viciously against the cement floor” (p. 134). Williams’ vacancy of mind and lack of intellect does not let him cogitate and contemplate. Therefore, he is completely unaware of his violent impulses.

Spiritual isolation leads the characters to defeatism but some sensitive and artistic natures in the face of alienation get so emotionally battered that they resort to their own physical mutilation. The spiritual emptiness and the emotional void of Alison Langdon’s life finds a grotesque expression in the gruesome act of cutting off her nipples with garden shears.

McCullers excels in the art of portraying the violence of adolescence. In The Heart, Mick represents adolescence but unlike Frankie Addams of The Member, Mick Kelly does not have the leisure to indulge in violent, conflicting emotions. She, however, gives a symbolic representation to violence in the pictures she draws of storms, city-fires, airplane crashes and battling citizens. Mick has a personal experience of violence when the prom party she arrangements is ruined by the unexpected
violence: "When she left the people were standing around... and it was a real party. Now - after just five minutes - the place looked more like a crazy house" (p. 96). Everything gets disordered and a kind of chaos breaks in: "A bunch of girls were running down the street, holding up their dresses and with the hair flying out behind them. Some boys had cut off the long, sharp spears of a Spanish bayonet bush and they were chasing the girls with them" (p. 97-98). "The final melee epitomizes adolescent flightiness. This debacle, a structural parallel for the flight in which Jack is later involved, is one of the concluding ceremonies of Mick's adolescence" (Gossett, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction, p165).

McCullers' adolescents are not crippled by violence but violence rather leads them to a healthy growth and maturity. In The Member, Frankie Addams does not experience violence as such; the violence she undergoes is the violence of conflicting emotions. She is pulled asunder by the desire to escape and the desire to belong. Frankie's feelings of boredom and the awareness of her not belonging find expression in violent actions: on impulse she fires her father's pistol in town, steals a knife from Sears, often indulges in knife throwing in the kitchen and also threatens to knife the Negro cook Berenice. Frankie's encounter with the soldier also ends up in violence. All these violent actions of Frankie represent not only her isolation but also the labyrinth of various desires a person on the threshold of life experiences.

In her delineation of the adolescent growth and maturity, McCullers does not yield to black pessimism and, therefore, the violence her adolescents undergo is not disastrous as we find in Truman Capote or
William Goyen. Frankie assumes three different names in her transition from childhood to youth and none of these three stages is free from some or the other kind of violence. "Each stage has its appropriate violence: the boisterous rampages of Frankie, the irresponsible boldness and theatrically threatened suicide of F. Jasmine, and the briefly suggested infatuations of Frances" (Gossett, Violence in Recent Southern Fiction, p.166). But these kinds of violence do not leave any emotional scar on Frankie's psychic development.

Some violence is merely reported in The Member like Berenice's eye being gouged out. Here McCullers tries to show the complex and inexplicable ways of love: in her desperate desire to repeat herself and Ludie, Berenice marries three times. Each marriage proves a disaster. Her last husband gouges out her right eye.

John Henry's death has been criticised by many as gratuitous and unwarranted. But a closer study of the matter shows that Henry's death is closely linked to McCullers' theme of spiritual isolation. As pointed out by R. M. Cook Frankie's unconcern at John Henry's suffering and his subsequent death shows how distant the two cousins had been, their physical nearness and frequent get-togethers, notwithstanding (Carson McCullers, p. 79).

As mentioned earlier circumventing of the instinct to love leads McCullers' characters to frustration and this frustration manifests itself in fights. In The Ballad, the mounting tension between Amelia and Marvin Macy erupts in a fight. Like white ants slowly eating away a
finely carved out piece of wood, the lingering tension between Amelia and Marvin Macy eats into the vitals of a blooming love — Amelia's love for Cousin Lymon. The outcome of the fight brings disaster for Amelia: She loses her love as well as the product of her love i.e. Cousin Lymon and the café. After poisoning her dishes and stealing her love, Marvin Macy vanishes for ever. With the violence erupting in the form of a physical encounter the cycle turns full circle. In her act of thrashing Marvin Macy and ultimately throwing him out of her premises, Amelia had resorted to violence and now Marvin Macy depriving her of her prized possessions, leaves her bereft of her emotional sustenance.

In *Clock Without Hands*, McCullers is concerned more with the social aspects of the Southern society than with the spiritual isolation of the individual characters though she does give us some glimpses into the loneliness of the characters. Violence, therefore, in this novel is more social. The suicide of Jester's father, the bombing of Sherman, the sudden death of the Grown-boy at the hands of the policeman — all point to the social flaws of Southern society.

One cannot fail to notice certain conspicuous features of McCullers' treatment of violence in her works. The first noteworthy aspect is the compassion, the sympathy with which she views her characters acting out their frustrations through violence. McCullers does not deride her characters for this. A strong current of violence runs through Flannery O'Connor's work, too, but there violence is inextricably linked up with the moral and the religious concerns of the novelist. Flannery O'Connor's characters arrive at a moral transcendant vision
after passing through violence. Miss O'Connor herself remarks, "I have found that my subject in fiction is the action of grace in the territory largely held by the devil" and she defines devil as "an evil intelligence determined on its own supremacy." Miss O'Connor finding her characters aspiring toward their own supremacy, dispensing with the moral and the theological concerns of the soul, brings them to reality with an intense violent act as she herself remarks, "Violence is capable of returning my characters to reality - and preparing them for their moment of grace." Violence in McCullers' work, however, lacks this moral complexion. As pointed out by Gossett, McCullers sees "the derangement of human life as a passing failure to be solved by a human restoration of beneficial relationships" (Violence in Recent Southern Fiction, p. 59).

Another prominent feature of violence as employed in McCullers' work is that for the most part it is confined to the personal and the private level. McCullers is primarily concerned with the soul of man, with its intense desire to seek love and understanding. Any impediment to this cherished goal leads to frustration which ultimately finds expression in violence. Except in problems generated by racial concerns, the source of human anguish and distress is love with its unpredictable nature and wayward ways. Therefore, McCullers restricts herself to the presentation of violence of the psychological disorders that result from thwarted love.
McCullers' intense awareness and deep sensitiveness to the spirit of the age, an age battered by the repercussions of the collapse of the religious, moral, ethical and communal bonds, is reflected in the form and devices of her work. Conscious of the fact that neither the assumptions of tragedy nor of comedy nor of romance could portray the human situation, McCullers takes to the suggestive and allusive powers of irony. Ihab Hassan finds irony most suited to the needs of the present situation and calls it "the literary correlative of the existential ethic."  

From her first novel *The Heart* on to her last novel *Clock* McCullers makes abundant use of irony. She employs irony to depict the elements of absurdity, the sense of isolation, quixotic motives, self-deceptions of the characters and the turning of their dreams into nightmares. The very theme of *The Heart* is based on an ironic awareness of man's need for home-made gods and his paradoxical desire for privacy and the need for understanding. The whole structure and the narrative mode of *The Heart* is geared to the artistic weaving of this vision. Blount, Mick and Copeland, in their efforts to seek a spiritual and emotional saviour converge on a deaf-mute. It is a tragic situation but the novelist selects from this tragic situation the element of absurdity (absurdity of depositing their dreams, hopes and faith in a deaf-mute without facing the reality of the whole situation) which inevitably leads to a sense of isolation among the characters.
In Jake Blount's story, irony springs from Blount's quixotic motive – betterment of the workers' lot through his gospel of truth. Blount's passion for this cause is genuine but it is so ironic that the person least gifted with the attributes of leadership should embark on the journey of leadership. This dream by necessity changes into a nightmare.

Reflections is built on the elements of absurdity. The characters and the situations of the novel embody a profound sense of absurdity. Leonora, the most happily adjusted person on the post, is a perfect animal who makes love to a stranger two hours after meeting him at nine in the morning; Captain Penderton bears his wife's adultery with charming graciousness and effortlessly kills Williams, the very person who becomes his most sought-after love object – all these symbolise the ambiguity, paradox and contradictions inherent in the modern existence.

The Ballad depicts the dreadfulness of isolation and is marked by an ambiguity of the tone and attitude and the fusion of genres and modes. The pattern of contradictions, ironies and ambiguities manifests itself in McCullers' theory of love wherein the "beloved fears and hates the lover" (p. 27). Out of the trio of main characters, Lymon is cast in the ironic mould. His "behaviour is the least predictable, his motivation, the most paradoxical and ironic" (McDowell, Carson McCullers, p. 74). Hunch-backed, physically weak and sick but malicious; helpless like a small child but longing for a male lover; leading the life of a pampered beloved but possessing a shrewd awareness of the realities
encompassing him, Cousin Lymon is the embodiment of the ambiguous path the lover-beloved have to follow in McCullers' world.

The Member, though a positivework when compared to other works of McCullers, brings out certain paradoxes and contradictions intrinsic to the human life. One is the adolescent desire to form new and exciting relationships coupled with the fear of losing the security of the existing relationships. The novel also delineates Frankie's quixotic quest for becoming "joined" by being the third member of her brother's wedding. The novel also brings out yet another ironic reality of the human life: even a very satisfying love can never be a perfect love. Berenice finds her ideal in Ludie Freeman and achieves a spiritual unity with him but she achieves it "at the cost of her self-sufficiency. At his death, part of herself [is] torn away and buried with him" (McDowell, p. 91). Similarly Frankie finds emotional sustenance in her friendship with Mary Littlejohn but this attachment changes a sensitive and feeling Frankie into an assertive and rather remote person who coldly abandons favouring John Henry and Berenice as well as her wild imaginings and aspirations.

McCullers' last novel Clock, though written with the avowed purpose of portraying the historical and political situation of the South of 1953 and 1954, successfully brings out the ironies of human life. Many characters and situations of the novel point to the paradoxes of human existence. Through J.T. Maloney's approaching death, McCullers lays bare a conspicuous paradox of human nature: the living shun the dying as if a dying person is an abnormality, a freak and not a representative of the human destiny.
McCullers also focusses the readers’ attention to another stark reality of the human existence through a paradox. Some persons become the victims of the malignant cosmic forces: the Creator withdraws His hands too soon, leaving them in a fragmented, incomplete and handicapped state. Eternally unsatisfied, they are forced to lead insignificant lives. They, in fact, do not live: they only exist. No one notices their existence. It is only an unnatural and violent death that brings them to the notice of the normal, healthy human beings. The episode of Grown Boy’s death and the public reaction to it illustrate this ironic perception of the novelist. What is remarkable in McCullers’ art is that she embodies these ironies in a very subtle way. To a facile reading these ironies do not manifest their intensity. To make the effect of these ironies strong and powerful, the novelist makes them seem incidental to the main story.

If the handicapped and the fragmented lead inconsequential lives there are some sensitive souls, McCullers says, who though not afflicted with physical defects, suffer psychic stress through the denial of spiritually satisfying and emotionally elevating lives. Malone, Sherman Pew and Sammy Lank - all represent the “wasted human potential” (McDowell, p. 106). The diminished aspect of their lives points to the irony that for a physically intact and vigorous person, life can be as empty, meaningless and unsatisfactory as for a physically handicapped person like Grown Boy or Wagon.
McCullers believes humour to be an essential part of the totality of man and she makes full use of it in her art. Humour in McCullers’ art is not trivial and inconsequential but rich, varied and complex. Her fiction displays pure humour, ironic humour, sardonic humour and satiric humour, adding profundity and richness to her work.

McCullers employs humour to portray an intense realism. She makes a conscious but artistic juxtaposition of the tragic and the humorous to create a greater impact of reality. Conscious of the fact that both the comic and the tragic rest on incompatibilities and are mutually exclusive, McCullers mingles them to add meaning to each other and to create a new and sublime incongruity. To a large extent it is McCullers’ use of this technique which makes her novels intensely moving experiences.

In The Member, Berenice, Frankie and John Henry in their assumed roles of creators provide light comedy. But comic effects so created have serious undertones. Holy Lord God Berenice Sadie Brown creates her ideal world where the whole earth is new “round and just and reasonable”, with no war, no murdered Jews and “no separate colored people . . . but all human beings . . . light brown color with blue eyes and black hair” (p. 91). Frankie’s world includes an aeroplane and a motorcycle to each person, a world club and war limited to one War Island where those who intend to fight could go and finally a world where people could change their sex. Holy Lord God John Henry West excitedly describes his world: “the sudden long arm that could stretch
from here to California, chocolate dirt and rains of lemonade, the extra
eye seeing a thousand miles, a hinged tail that could be let down as
a kind of prop to sit on when you wished to rest, the candy flowers”
(p. 91). In the comic treatment of the theme of the world creator wherein
Berenice, Frankie and John Henry act as the Trinity, McCullers not only
focusses on the flaws of the existing world but also reveals the individuality
of the three characters. In their assumed roles of the creator they reveal
their hopes, sorrows, joys, desires and dreams.

Humour as a method of fore-shadowing serious effects is
used often by McCullers but its use is irregular. It is used repeatedly
in The Heart to facilitate the desolate ending of the novel. For instance
Blount’s passion for the betterment of the workers through his kind of truth
ends in fiasco. The tragic end of Blount’s quest is foreshadowed when the
novelist describes his conversation with a customer at Biff Brannon’s
restaurant wherein Blount asserts: “I’m part nigger myself”; “I’m part
nigger and wop and bohunk and chink. All of those”; “And I’m Dutch and
Turkish and Japanese and American”; “I’m one who knows. I’m a stranger
in a strange land” (p. 18 - 19). At its face-value Blount’s behaviour
seems funny and amusing but at a deeper level the novelist subtly
hints at crippling flaw in Blount’s get up—his lack of roots, his fanatic
faith in the perfection of his knowledge which in reality is distorted. It is
this flaw which becomes one powerful factor for the failure and frustration
of his dream.

The three characters of the novel, i.e. Mick, Copeland and Blount
place their spiritual trust, faith and hope in a character who himself is
deaf-mute and emotionally more vulnerable than them. "You're the only one in this town who catches what I mean . . . I know you understand the things I . . . mean" (p. 19); "It was funny, but Mister Singer reminded her of this music (p. 45); "Other voices called wordless in his [Copeland's] heart. The voice of Jesus . . . and of Karl Marx . . . Of the mute singer, who was a righteous white man of understanding" (p. 282) show Blount's, Mick's and Copeland's reactions to Singer. The spiritual frustration of these characters is foreshadowed here by the humorous side of the whole situation wherein reality is so effortlessly blinked away for the cultivation of illusions and hopeless dreams.

In The Member Frankie seeks the end of her isolation through complete identification with a wedding. "Because of the wedding, F. Jasmine felt connected with all she saw, and it was as a sudden member that on this Saturday she went around the town" (p. 44). Frankie's identification with the wedding takes the whole situation to the level of absurdity. "The world had never been so close to her . . . she suddenly saw the three of them - herself, her brother, and the bride-walking beneath a cold Alaskan Sky, along the sea where green ice waves lay frozen and Folded on the shore; they climbed a sunny glacier shot through with pale cold colors and a rope tied the three of them together, and friends from another glacier called in Alaskan their J A names. She saw them next in Africa, where, with a crowd of sheeted Arabs, they galloped on camels in the sandy wind. Burma was jungle-dark, and she had seen pictures in Life magazine. Because of the wedding, these distant lands, the world, seemed altogether possible and near: as close to Winter Hill as Winter Hill.
was to the town" (pp. 66-67): the miserable end of Frankie's dream is foreshadowed in the humorous piling up of her fantasies.

In *The Ballad* humour has been employed to further plot-development. For instance Amelia's personality has been depicted in the comic mode; Cousin Lymon accentuates the comic elements and Lymon's betrayal of Amelia, beset with tragic repercussions, has been presented in a comic mode. The narrator's vocabulary, common, ordinary, of everyday use, comic in its emphasis, adds to the humour of the novel. McCuller's technique of humour involves a "colorful vocabulary, a curious phrasing, or a use of surprising illustrations" (McDowell, p. 77). At the same time in simple and direct sentences the narrator expresses his philosophic assertions.

The fight between Amelia and Lymon is a very significant event for this event finally determines the destiny of not only the leading citizen of the community but of the town itself. But this is how the novelist presents:

"The people had flattened back as close as possible against the walls. Stumpy MacPhail was in corner, crouched over and with his fists tight in sympathy, making strange noises. Poor Merlie Ryan had his mouth so wide open that a fly buzzed into it, and was swallowed before Merlie realized what had happened. And Cousin Lymon -- he was worth watching. The hunchback still stood on the counter, so that he was raised up above everyone else in the café. He had his hands on his hips, his big head thrust forward, and his little legs bent so that the knees jutted outward. The excitement had made him break out in a rash, and his pale mouth shivered" (pp. 66-67). Similarly Lymon and Marvin Macy shatter
Amelia's arduously built up world of beauty and communication but the novelist humorously lists the damage done itemwise. This again is a comic device employed by McCullers wherein the listing of items or the detailed descriptions seem humorously irrelevant in the context but in the overall assessment of her art we find it contributing to a stark and relentless realism.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


8 Ibid.


12 Ibid.