STRUCTURE, STYLE AND SYMBOLS

A versatile artist, gifted with consummate craftsmanship, McCullers recognises the value of both the intellect and emotions in the field of literary creations. Her conception of good fiction comes near to what David Madden terms “a willed act of intelligence wedded to imagination”. In her pursuit of the thematic concerns, McCullers displays a total, borrowing Madden’s phrase “gestalt-like grasp” (A Primer of the Novel, p. 104) of the raw material of her story in which both vision and meaning coalesce. It is this pursuit of McCullers which determines her strategy with structure, style, symbols and imagery.
The structural analysis of *The Heart* shows that in this novel McCullers makes a studied and studious use of plot-construction. In raising the structural edifice, the novelist never loses sight of the thematic concerns of her fiction, i.e., man's spiritual isolation. Writing of a "disorganised . . . wasteful . . . short-sighted society" which denies God, religion, fruitful communion and annihilates man's sense of traditional order and community, McCullers displays a profound "concern with form . . . a search for new literary structures capable of ordering the new matter of modernity." Like Sherwood Anderson, Faulkner and many other modernists, McCullers discerns in the twisted features of the grotesque "disjunctive forms capable of reflecting the fragmentation and alienation of the modern world." The *Heart* displays several features characteristic of disjunctive form like "multiple narrators, isolated chapters, disjoined levels and sequences of narration."

*The Heart* is divided into three parts. Its tripartite structure is a well thought out device and a part of the novelist's technique. With a view to stress the importance of the individual character and his problems, McCullers uses a structural device to suit it. The first part consists of five chapters which introduce separately each of the major characters. Each chapter is confined to the presentation of the view-point of a single character. Millichap discerns in this technique some close links with the technique of stream-of-consciousness ("Distorted Matter and Disjunctive Forms," p. 346). The first part introduces the reader to what McCullers in
her outline of the novel calls "the general web of the book." Part two comprises fifteen chapters: five centred around Mick, three around Copeland, two each around Blount and Biff, with three general chapters. It is this part that covers the major plot development and depicts the interaction of the characters over the course of a year through carefully thought out and coherently structured series of events. Characters evolve in the duration of one year depicted in this part. Blount's quest for the amelioration of the exploited workers turns futile; Copeland miserably fails in his life-long mission; Brannon's sexual ambivalence turns him into a "sort of psychological hermaphrodite" (Millichap, p. 346) while Mick, abandoning the pursuit of beauty and love through music, settles for drudgery at a ten-cent store.

Flashbacks are used to provide a sense of movement in time. The characters still keep their hopes pinned on Singer's friendship but the climax of part II dismantles this possibility as Singer commits suicide. Part III consists of four chapters which show the characters vainly trying hard to recapture their spiritual poise. They fail in this endeavour for they "have become, through the disintegrative forces of their exploitative social setting and through their own personal incompletions, too distorted to function in life" (Millichap, p. 346). McCullers gives body and shape to this vision through her "disjunctive narrative structure which fully realises the Modernist vision of personal fragmentation and alienation" (Millichap, p. 346).

Reflections is a planned novel, superbly executed, almost Flaubertian in its execution. The novelist is guided by the tone of the
thematic aspect of her work. The Heart focusses on the spiritual isolation of man but the narrative is tinged with sympathy and compassion; Reflections dilates upon the same theme but McCullers here depicts a world, stark and barren, trapped in instinctual necessities and inner compulsions to the exclusion of positive forces like idealism, hope and love. This vision informs the form of the novel. Portraying a restricted and intense world, the novelist goes in for speed and concentration. The plot moves with a stunning swiftness. Without any beating about the bush, the novelist plunges into the heart of the story and then everything that happens - adultery, brutality, the frozen hate of impotence and sexual frenzy is narrated with a shocking speed and what Robert M. Rechnitz calls an “equanimity of tone” ("The failure of love : The Grotesque in Two Novels by Carson McCullers", p. 455) till the firing of shots killing Williams brings an end to the narrative.

The novel is divided into four sections. The first section presents Private Williams, the creature of nature who avoids people but easily relates to horses. He shuns women under a Puritanical compulsion believing that all women carry deadly disease. In his initial encounter with Williams, Captain Penderton reacts with animosity which “adumbrates their more violent encounter at its close” (McDowell, p. 45). Penderton’s obsessive and maniacal desire to compel the alive and the animate to conform to patterned life is well brought out. This section also brings out the hostile relationship between Captain Penderton and his wife Leonora.

Section II elaborates the obsessive compulsions of the various characters, and gives us some inkling of their history, thereby, rooting the
different characters in their environmental, social and psychological factors. Section III of the novel depicts Captain's frustration breaking into violence when his efforts to control the natural energy, symbolised by Leonora's horse, Firebird, fail. The Captain's ambivalent relationship with Private Williams continues with unabated fury and so is Anacleto's complete devotion to Alison Langdon.

Most of the action of the Section IV takes place symbolically in darkness. Williams is noticed in Penderton's house by Alison who reports the matter to the Captain, an action which lands Alison in a mental asylum where she dies soon after her confinement. Anacleto who accompanies her to the asylum disappears while on discovering Williams in his wife's room, Penderton shoots him dead.

Compared with The Heart, Reflections is simple but clear, sharp and chiselled in execution. There is no fumbling in the design: economy and precision mark the plot-delineation. "Not a word is wasted; the first paragraph plunges us deeply into the story, and our interest . . . is not allowed to flag for a single instant. Reflections in a Golden Eye . . . accomplishes a very great deal in a very short space" (Oliver Evans, Carson McCullers, p. 81).

The story of The Ballad is told by a "balladeer-narrator." McCullers' creation of the ballad world, the use of the ballad structure and some of its ingredients is deliberate, conscious and functional. She "exploit[s] the archetypal energy of the ballad world and the formal simplicity of the ballad structure" (Millichap, "Carson McCullers' Literary
Ballad," p. 329) to create a timeless realm of human passions and to depict the pain and suffering that filters out of the failure of passions. The plot is developed tightly and economically and the narrator's presence imparts rich human touches to it, dramatises the conflict and sprinkles mythic touches on to the story wherever required.

The Member of the Wedding once again exhibits the kind of formal unity which McCullers' first novel lacks but the second one possesses in abundance. Fully aware of the fact that this novel "is one of those works that the least slip can ruin," McCullers took extra care with plot-construction, technique and style. The novel is divided into three parts, the content and the tone of each part determined by the role Frankie takes on. In the first part we are introduced to Frankie Addams, bored and restless, mainly confined to the kitchen and the company of Berenice and John Henry. She seeks to be the third member of her brother's approaching wedding. In the second part she emerges as F. Jasmine - a dreamy, radiant, exotic and romantic personality, full of anticipation which in fact is prelude to her disenchantment set in the last section. Frankie's encounter with the soldier and her meeting people during her wanderings through the town provide meaningful juxtaposition, precision and balance to the work. With the master stroke of an artist, McCullers disposes of the wedding in a few seemingly insignificant lines in the last section. F. Jasmine becomes Frances Addams, symbolising transformation in her personality. John Henry dies, Berenice prepares to leave the Addams' household and Frances and her father plan to move out to the new suburb. Frances acquires a new friend, Mary LittleJohn,
braided and brown-eyed. Through the structural design, McCullers symbolically suggests the prevailing pattern of human life wherein a sense of frustration and incompleteness comes to the fore.

McCullers' last novel *Clock Without Hands* lacks the structural design and formal unity of the *Reflections, Ballad* and *The Member*. The main reason for this failure is that the novelist, diverting from her avowed thematic concern with human isolation, attempts to bring together, sometimes with abrupt switch-overs “the realistic portrayal of a historical political situation and symbolic fantasy ... a violent tragedy and a sequence of broadly satiric comedy ... and to pursue throughout an entire novel two sets of largely unrelated themes - those involving the individual’s facing of death and those involving racial conflict and abuse of political and legal power” (McDowell, *Carson McCullers*, p. 98). However, McCullers does succeed in giving some new insights into the dimensions of loneliness - the loneliness of a dying man and the alienation of an adolescent who is without roots and hence without any identity to sustain his existence. By making J.T. Malone, the dying druggist, an “organising entity”, McCullers not only provides an emotional centre but also “extends the range of the authorial comment” (McDowell, p. 111). Sherman Pew, the blue-eyed Mulatto, symbolises the search for racial and personal identity.

III

The settings of McCullers’ novels are created with a view to achieve maximum effects on all levels of the central experience depicted in her
fiction. In The Heart, a Georgia mill town, situated in the middle of the deep South, with long summers where “the Sun burned down riotously bright” (p.3), with most of its workers being very poor and displaying “the desperate look of hunger and of loneliness” (p.4), where stillness of the streets intensifies the feeling of loneliness and everything seems to have “come to a sudden, static halt” (p.50) provides an appropriate setting which goes far beyond furnishing a mere backdrop or a scenic prop. It acts as an augmentation and extension of the metaphorical truth McCullers wishes to convey.

The setting in Reflections is a Southern army post in peacetime where regimentation and impersonality constitute the hallmark of life. The physical layout of the post: “the huge, concrete barracks, the neat rows of officers’ homes, built one precisely like the other, the gym, the chapel, the golf course, and the swimming pools... designed according to a certain rigid pattern” (p.1) denotes the repressive spirit pervading the post. A patterned, regimented, artificial life lived on an army post succeeds very well in highlighting man’s spiritual isolation. “A spirit of mindless conformity pervades the post tending to regulate all behaviour and thought according to the drab official standards of military protocol” (Cook, Carson McCullers, pp. 48-49). Such an environment with its inherent alienating potential serves as a fine metaphor, heightening the thematic content of McCullers’ work.

Most of McCullers’ third novel The Member is set in the kitchen of Frankie’s home. As Millichap has pointed out, the kitchen is one of those rooms in McCullers’ fiction which “mirror inner psychological states.”

A
part of the novel is set in the town and like kitchen the town too mirrors Frankie’s inner feelings.

The Ballad is set in a lonely, dreary Georgia mill town, “a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world. . . . there is nothing whatsoever to do” (p.3). Here the setting accentuates the general climate of loneliness.

Clock Without Hands is set in a small town in Georgia. Since this novel mainly deals with a historical political situation involving racial conflict and abuse of political and legal power, there is more of surface realism and the setting is more realistic — realistic in the sense that it is without symbolic and metaphorical connotations.

IV

Speaking about style, Zola said, “For the writer, genius is not to be found only in the feeling, in the a priori idea, but is also in the form and style.” In the fiction of McCullers we find an unmistakable illustration of this assertion. Her diction, syntax, verbal details, imagery and connotations are such as express, define and evaluate the central themes of her work. By and large, she handles the raw material of her fiction with an eye on the manipulating power of the style.

In The Heart McCullers employs a mid-style which is a combination of the simple style and the complex style. The simple style is marked by economy, objectivity and is concrete, clear, exact and vivid
while the complex style is elaborate, lyrical, and subjective. In The Heart, we find McCullers resorting to both these styles. Her style is dictated by the structure of the novel. As the novel opens, McCullers goes straight into the subject of the story, i.e. the state of man's spiritual isolation, his efforts to surmount it and his inevitable failure.

The first chapter, devoted to the Singer-Antonapoulos relationship, is the story of the human heart expressing the basic, irresistible desire to integrate with something or somebody to end its inner isolation. So the author takes to the legendary style: “In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together” (The Heart, p. I), so starts the opening section of the novel. And with this opening, where the locale is a town inhabited by two mutes who were always together, we are transported to the eternal, the unfading and undying world of imagination where the concerns are the issues of the soul and contingencies of the inward life. The world of mutes by necessity remains insulated from the immediate environment of the nameless town surrounding them for theirs is the world of the human heart, the eternal mesh of human hopes seeking love and warmth.

The story of Singer and Antonapoulos is nothing but a parable of love: love's valiant search for its object, its determined bid to break isolation and bring in that communion which elevates the soul to rare moments of beauty, grace and magnificence. Hence McCullers takes recourse to the legendary style whenever and wherever she concerns herself with the story of Singer and Antonapoulos. Millichap aptly comments that the legendary style “adds a timeless quality to chapter
one... helping to establish the archetypal nature of events narrated." The legendary style recurs in each of the key chapters concerned with Singer and Antonapoulos.

The other chapters of the novel (2-5 of part one; 1-6, 8-14 of part two; 1-of part three) employ styles related to the central personality of the chapter. For example, the style of chapter II of the first part centred around Biff Brannon is flat, objective, clear and factual. Taking into consideration Brannon's character, this kind of style seems the most appropriate one. McCullers was very clear about the styles to be adopted in her first novel. In the outline of her novel she states, "There are five different styles of writing - one for each of the main characters who is treated subjectively and an objective, legendary style for the mute. The object in each of these methods of writing is to come as close as possible to the inner psychic rhythms of the character from whose point of view it is written." In addition to being analogous to different characters, these different styles heighten the pervading sense of isolation: different styles, multiple narrators and isolated chapters reinforce the motif of spiritual isolation.

McCullers' style in Reflections is marked by economy and objectivity. Here the style is concrete, clear and vivid. It has been admitted even by not very sympathetic critics of the novelist that her second novel exhibits remarkable control over technique and mastery over the architectonic aspect of fiction and no technique can become excellent without giving style its due place. It is as a result of McCullers' deliberate care and concern for style that she is able to transmit not only her vision of
the human condition but even the tone this novel assumes in the presentation of the vision. With her matter-of-fact, bold and chiselled diction, McCullers establishes the required tone, voice and atmosphere in the novel: the theme of the novel is the barren, sterile and destructive life which emerges when the fullness of life is denied and life is lived on obsessively fragmented level and McCullers style with its chilling clarity, icy objectivity and benumbing factuality not only expresses the theme but becomes a part of the vision itself.

Like an accomplished craftsman, McCullers employs appropriate words and phrases at the right and appropriate place. Every word has its place: there is complete mastery of design because the style gives thrust to the design. Even the descriptions are determined by the point of view of the novelist. For instance the key words in the opening paragraph of *Reflections* are “dull”, “monotony”, “neat rows”, “rigid pattern” and “insularity”. The diction in the very opening lines suggests and establishes the theme to be developed later in the novel.

McCullers’ style is at times suggestive without sacrificing precision and clarity. For instance while hinting at the Captain’s diminutive spiritual stature, McCullers presents dialogue between the Captain and Private Williams: “the way the boughs swept down and made a background shutting off the rest of the woods was the whole point. Now it is all ruined”. The Captain’s agitation seemed more than such a mishap warranted - standing alone in the woods he was a small man” (*Reflections*, p. 8). “Shutting off the rest of the woods,” “Standing alone,” “small man,” though suggestive yet in no way impede clarity or create fuzziness: the style
remains firm, and clear though evocative. The style reveals the Captain’s character, his incapacity to accept life in all its vitality - an aspect of his character which is inextricably linked up with the theme of the novel.

McCullers’ The Ballad is the product of conscious artistry. Portraying a world of human passions, the ballad structure is exploited to confer universality upon a tale which without the technique in which it is clothed would appear weird and grotesque. The major credit for this transformation goes to McCullers’ narrative style. Albert J. Griffith holds the novel’s style in great esteem: “the lyricism of the McCullers narrative style . . . can render even sordid subject matter in poetic terms.”

McCullers introduces a narrator in the novel. The narrator’s presence is closely linked with the stylistic integrity of the story. The narrator acts as a “filtering personality” (Millichap, “Carson McCullers’ literary Ballad, p. 330). In this status he humanises the story, reveals the innermost secrets of the human heart, thereby, incorporating a touch of timelessness to the narrative. The narrator’s voice is able to accomplish this remarkable feat not only by being lyrical but by being the blend of many styles. The style resorted to by the narrator’s voice is objective, factual and dry at a point and the next moment it turns subjective and suggestive. Moments later the style assumes the tone of a parable, “once upon a time” tone to be followed by colloquial and conversational style.

“The town itself is dreary; not much is there except the cotton mill, the two-room houses where the workers live . . . and a miserable main street only a hundred yards long . . . Otherwise the town is lonesome, sad,
and like a place that is far off and estranged from all other places in the world... The winters here are short and raw, the summers white with glare and fiery hot" (The Ballad, p.3). Here the style is flat, objective, factual and "inflectionless" but a careful choice of words helps creating the atmosphere in which the author can unfold her vision of human condition. But the narrator's voice changes its tone the moment it makes a mention of the protagonist of the story: "sometimes in the late afternoon when the heat is at its worst a hand will slowly open the shutter and a face will look down on the town. It is a face like the terrible dim faces known in dreams - sexless and white, with two gray crossed eyes which are turned inward so sharply that they seem to be exchanging with each other one long and secret gaze of grief" (p.3-4). The style here is no longer flat and factual, inflectionless and dry: it becomes subjective, poetic and suggestive, placing the protagonist in a situation where the reader's emotional response becomes one of curiosity and sympathy.

The narrator's voice goes ahead. Himself a member of the community where the drama of elemental human passion took place, he takes upon himself the narration of the background of the story and for this purpose assumes the tone of a story-teller and the style becomes legendary.

However, here in this very town there was once a café. And this old boarded-up house was unlike any other place for many miles around... There were tables with cloths and paper napkins, colored streamers from the electric fans, great gatherings on Saturday nights... The place was not always a café. Miss Amelia inherited the building from her father... Miss Amelia was rich... She was a dark, tall woman with bones and muscles like a man (The Ballad, p.4). 182
Here the style not only aims at telling a story but also furnishes us with a sense of place and later informs us about the nature and characteristics of the community which witnessed the tragic failure of love.

It was toward midnight on a soft quiet evening in April. The sky was the color of a blue swamp iris, the moon clear and bright. The crops that spring promised well... Down by the creek the square brick factory was yellow with light, and there was the faint, steady hum of the looms. It was such a night when it is good to hear from faraway, across the dark fields, the slow song of a Negro on his way to make love. Or when it is pleasant to sit quietly and pick a guitar, or simply to rest alone and think of nothing at all (The Ballad, pp. 5-6).

Here the style is marked by suggestiveness, poetic nuances and also foreshadows the arrival of love in the dreary life of a dry and stand-offish Amelia.

The above given instances showing the different and divergent styles operating in a single voice clearly show that this style, a blend of the literate and colloquial, the objective and personal, with loquacious observation, helps the author embody the central perception of her work in high art and discern the truth of the human condition even in characters that seem bizarre and outlandish and in situations that are ludicrous.

McCullers is very watchful and attentive to style in The Member for the onus of making the poetry of the novel successful falls mainly on the style. Here McCullers' style is metaphorical, suggestive, symbolic and evocative.

T.S.Eliot, while describing metaphysical poetry, gave a very useful term, "Objective Correlative" wherein an object or an action is described
in such a way that it correlates to the subjective experience of one of the characters. McCullers' style in *The Member* extensively employs this device.

But there was nothing to do. John Henry stood, his knees locked and his hands clasped behind his back, in the middle of the room. There were moths at the window - pale green moths and yellow moths that fluttered and spread their wings against the screen. "Those beautiful butterflies', he said, 'they are trying to get in' (*The Member*, p. 11).

The clock ticked very slowly on the shelf . . . The glare outside the window was still hard and yellow and bright . . . Nothing moved. From somewhere far away came the sound of whistling and it was a grieving August song that did not end. The minutes were very long (*The Member*, p. 16).

Very early in the morning she would sometimes go out into the yard and stand for a long time looking at the sunrise sky. And it was as though a question came into her heart, and the sky did not answer. Things she had never noticed much before began to hurt her: home lights watched from the evening sidewalks, an unknown voice from an alley. She would stare at the lights and listen to the voice, and something inside her stiffened and waited. But the lights would darken, the voice fall silent, and though she waited, that was all (*The Member*, p. 22).

In the first example an action takes place: the moths attracted by the lighted room try desperately to get into the room and flutter against the screen of the closed window. This description reflects Frankie's state wherein she feels hurt when she notices the togetherness of the other people and attracted by the desire to belong, she struggles and makes frantic efforts to get into some 'we-hood'. Here a physical description describes the emotional state.
In the second example “the glare” which is “hard and yellow and bright” makes us aware of Frankie's plight wherein she has to confront the harsh reality of an adult life as against the fragility of illusions of an adolescent. The “grieving August song” captures Frankie’s agony at her isolation and loneliness. “Nothing moved . . . The minutes were very long,” portrays Frankie's sense of confinement and entrapment.

In the third example the sky heightens Frankie’s sense of frustration and existential dread; home lights intensify her acute sense of isolation and express her keenly-felt desire to seek the ‘we’ of her ‘I’ while an “unknown voice from the alley” is listened to with an expectation that it might hold some hidden message for Frankie. But everything fails and disappoints Frankie, leaving her high and dry: “the lights would darken, the voice fall silent.”

These are just a few examples showing the metaphoric richness of McCullers’ style where words, phrases, similies, metaphors and even scenes and objects are portrayed and employed with both explicit and implicit connotations. The result is that McCullers is able to give us “a fairly clear, explicit writing - explicit even in its use of the anomalous, the paradoxical, the amorphous confusions of life” wherein “one thing is always described in terms of another.”

VI

Geoffrey Moore in one of his lectures, speaking about the American imagination remarked, “Fantasy then, and the bluntest
statements of facts, the language of allegory and the language of the market-place - these are anodes and cathodes through which the current of American literature flows.  

This statement when applied to McCullers' work, seems to be no exaggeration. McCullers' work reveals a realist's predilection for details, appearances and sensual aspects of the world but this realism is interwoven with the profundity and enrichment of symbolism. What Marguerite Young, a very perceptive critic, once wrote about The Member can be said to apply to McCullers' whole fiction: Young found "narrative and allegory" as the "two headed flower growing from one stem" ("Metaphysical Fiction," p. 153). Evans also comments about the realistic and allegorical levels in McCullers' fiction.  

McCullers grounds her stories in the solid, substantial and tangible world and anchors them in actual place and time. But she also presents certain aspects of this real world in such a way that they become associated with certain feelings and ideas, dilating upon the thematic concerns of her work. Abjuring the traditional means of analysis and description, McCullers works through a series of highly charged poetic images to portray her vision. "Her writing develops interesting juxtapositions; the simple and the elusive, realism and imaginative symbolism. To the realist's strict regard of appearances and sense experience she has joined the symbolist's preoccupation with meaning and value."  

Despite the strong streak of symbolism and allegory in it, McCullers' work sticks fast and stands firm in the domain of realism. Take for instance, the locales of her novels. The Heart has for its locale a Southern mill-city. McCullers has given a realistic picture of the town with
all the major and minor details essential for its build-up. A town with thirty thousand population, four big cotton mills, narrow unpaved streets with two-room shacks, 'rotten and unpainted' and 'dingy' and hungry-looking children, could be any Southern industrialised town of the forties.

According to Joseph R. Millichap the city depicted in the novel is "a realistic picture of a specific place, and a knowledge of the South and its history adds to the appreciation of the narrative." In a footnote of his article, J.R. Millichap points out the descriptions of North Carolina mill-cities in W.J. Cash's classic The Mind of the South, as confirmation of the historical realism of McCullers.

Reflections has for its locale an army post in the deep South. Here, all details regarding an army post, matters of rank, architecture and armour have been faithfully furnished. Similarly, the town in The Member is portrayed with a sure touch and the descriptions of the town in The Ballad are such that it emerges as a small town, cut off from the rest of the world, where elemental passions swell up. Realism in the locales of McCullers springs up effortlessly for her "talent has firm roots in the local scene. . . . She has all the realist's concern for the shapes and colors, for the particularities of persons and things." McCullers' dialogues also display her hold over realism. Her dialogues are authentic and true to the psyche of the character depicted. Singer's "dialogue" is clear, crisp and precise because he has an inner calm and has poise: Blount only harangues because his is an utterly chaotic personality: Biff's dialogues reflect his trait of impersonal observation:
Frankie's dialogues display her confusion and bewilderment by what she feels is the “wrong” use of words: Copeland's use of abstract words and phrases is indicative of his insulation from some stark realities of his race while Portia and Berenice's dialogues along with those of the other minor black characters show that McCullers handles the dialogues of Negro characters with a rare felicity which many other novelists find quite unmanageable.

In her outlines of "The Mute", McCullers makes special mention of the suggestive power of her writing and clearly states that her themes will not be "stated nakedly" because she believes that a good book implies a great deal more than the words actually say.¹⁸ Again in "The Flowering Dream" she speaks of writing as "a wandering dreaming occupation" in which "the intellect is submerged beneath the unconscious."¹⁹ In the same essay McCullers asserts that Singer in The Heart and Captain Penderton in Reflections were meant to serve as symbols. All this clearly shows how seriously McCullers believes in the symbolic mode of narration and in her fiction she exploits this mode both for the aesthetic and thematic purposes.

Like most other American novelists, McCullers relies a great deal on symbolism to evoke and re-inforce her theme of spiritual isolation through symbols. The first and the foremost symbol employed to suggest the state of isolation is physical deformity. Most of McCullers' characters are physically deformed and freaks: their deformities and freakishness signifying their alienation.
McCullers uses rooms as powerful symbols to delineate varied emotions and states of mind of her characters. Mick’s “inside room” is not a physical place but a psychological and psychic place. It conveys her sense of isolation and the consequent need for withdrawal from the outside and objective world into a subjective, inner world of dreams and illusions: “With her it was like there was two places - the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. . . . Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room. . . . The inside room was a very private place” (The Heart, p. 138). The inside room signifies Mick’s flight into the world of beauty, dreams and imagination. It “brings temporary feelings of peace and direction, but it represents yet another retreat into spiritual isolation that can cripple as well as console” (Cook, Carson McCullers, p. 27).

The kitchen in The Member is yet another room which acts as a multi-purpose symbol for it evokes and re-inforces different and diverse emotions of the protagonist of the novel. At the outset one notices the prison-aspect of the kitchen. With its “queer, child drawings” (p. 4) on its gray walls and “a watery kitchen mirror” (p.2), Frankie finds it a kind of cage where she finds herself trapped. Frankie’s description of the kitchen as “square and gray and quiet” (p.2), “a sad and ugly room” (p.4), a room with “a crazy look, like that of a room in the crazy-house” (p.4) reflects Frankie’s sense of sadness at her not belonging to any one or any club or institution and the nagging fear of freakishness in her abnormal height. The kitchen with its frequent silences heightens Frankie’s sense of isolation: “It was only half-past six . . . and in the kitchen nothing moved”
In fact the kitchen's silences have been subtly exploited to evoke "that moment of suspense which precedes a crisis" (Wikborg, Carson McCullers' The Member of the Wedding, p. 65). For instance in Part I of the novel, provoked by Berenice's teasing, Frankie manifests her stored feelings of frustration by throwing a knife across the room. There is tension in the scene conveyed by the silence of the kitchen: “She closed her eyes and the kitchen was very quiet. She could feel the beating of her heart” (p. 31). “The kitchen was suddenly shrunken and quiet” (p. 33).

Some critics discern in the kitchen a microcosm of the macrocosm "a monotonous and sordid world from which there is no escape for most of us" (Evans, Carson McCullers, p. 106). But this view though it captures some momentary impressions cannot be accepted in toto. It needs some qualification for the kitchen does not merely reflect the prison-aspect of Frankie's existence. In Part II of the novel, when Frankie is full of anticipation and euphoria, she lingers in the kitchen for a while, feels reluctant to leave it for it has been a spiritual refuge to her in her time of emotional turbulence.

The café in McCullers' fiction stands for a place where the shackles of isolation and the barriers of alienation are broken and efforts are made at comradeship, companionship and conviviality. In The Heart Mick Kelly, John Singer, Jake Blount and Biff Brannon frequent the New York Café and a great part of the novel is delineated there – a very appropriate place for the different characters to open up and unveil their dreams, their frustrations and the oppressive sense of isolation. In The Ballad also the café occupies a pivotal place. It has been termed “a
kind of bulwark against the impersonal and the inimical” (Evans, p. 134). Miss Amelia's “whole new inward world,” the café takes on mythic proportions becoming "an archetypal place for renewal." Its destruction brings the tragic loss of the spiritual integration and emotional alliance experienced by the protagonist as well as the whole town.

In a prefatory note to The Mortgaged Heart published after Carson McCullers' death, her sister Margarita Smith aptly comments that McCullers was necessarily amusician and a poet in all that she wrote (p. ii). McCullers early training in music exerted a significant influence on her writing. Using the music motif in its multifarious forms, as objective correlative, as a comprehensive and cohesive structural device, McCullers creates the effects which are “often startling as she develops the far-reaching intonations of situations that might otherwise seem only melodramatic or sensational” (McDowell, Carson McCullers, p. 15). McCullers employs the motif of music to highlight the sense of frustration, fragmentation, incompletion and isolation enveloping her characters. However, occasionally she makes use of musical allusions to symbolise harmony and a sense of togetherness. What is very remarkable about her symbolic use of music is that it is done in a way which is suggestive, unobtrusive and yet effective.

In The Heart, music works on two levels - as a major symbol and as a minor symbol. As a major symbol it represents a world of beauty, dreams and inspiration. To Mick, music is the manifestation of her vision of love. “It was a funny thing - but nearly all the time there was some kind of piano piece or other music going on in the back of her [Mick's] mind. No
matter what she was doing or thinking it was nearly always there” (The Heart, p. 29). Music also conveys Mick’s different and divergent emotions – the unnameable but sharp shades of the adolescent yearnings and fears: “she was trying to think of the name of this fellow who had written this music she heard over the radio last winter... In her mind she could remember about six different tunes from the pieces of his she had heard. A few of them were kind of quick and tinkling, and another was like that smell in the spring-time after a rain. But they all made her somehow sad and excited at the same time” (p. 31). Music is also associated with cherished company: “The fellow Motsart’s music was in her mind again. It was funny, but Mister Singer reminded her of this music” (p. 45).

Sometimes, it is music that provides a sensitive soul with an illuminating and enlightening experience - a rare elevating and uplifting moment that makes the mundane realities of life bearable. After the unexpected failure of her party, Mick whose family cannot afford the luxury of a radio, listens to music emanating from a neighbour’s radio. After a few popular tones are broadcast, there is Beethoven: “How did it come? For a minute the opening balanced from one side to the other. Like a walk or march. Like God strutting in the night” (The Heart, p. 100). But McCullers is too well aware of the ironies and paradoxes of life to make sustained moments of spiritual elevation feasible in life. Soon Mick is back on earth and realises that it is her complete identification with music that blinds her into a momentary seer-like vision: “After a while the music came again, harder and loud. It didn’t have anything to do with God. This was her, Mick Kelly, walking in the daytime and by herself at night. In the

* The novelist has deliberately mis-spelt the word.
hot sun and in the dark with all the plans and feelings. This music was her - the real plain her” (p. 100).

Again it is through the symbolic use of music that McCullers so effectively portrays the unnameable fears and the unworded excitement of an adolescent heart:

The outside of her was suddenly froze and only that first part of the music was hot inside her heart. She could not even hear what sounded after, but she sat there waiting and froze, with her fists tight... Then at last the opening music came again, with all the different instruments bunched together for each note like a hard, tight fist that socked at her heart... She sat with her arms held tight around her legs, biting her salty knee very hard. The second part was black-colored — a slow march. Not sad, but like the whole world was dead and black and there was no use thinking back how it was before. One of those horn kind of instruments played a sad and silver tune. Then the music rose up angry and with excitement underneath (The Heart, pp. 100-101).

The following passage shows how music enables Mick to find some significance in her otherwise crippling life: “But maybe the last part of the symphony was the music she loved the best — glad and like the greatest people in the world running and springing up in a hard, free way. Wonderful music like this was the worst hurt there could be. The whole world was this symphony, and there was not enough of her to listen” (p.101). Barbara N. Folk is of the view that here Mick “does experience vicariously a moment of elevation, even of promise” (The Sweet Sad Music of Carson McCullers," p.204).

Other instances, where music acts as a symbol of beauty, harmony, elegance, companionship and togetherness are found in Reflections.
Alison Langdon, Anacleto and Lieutenant Weincheck who are spiritually bound to each other find the world around them too harsh and discordant and seek refuge in the world of music and arts. Alison and Anacleto go to concert shows whenever it is feasible for them and these occasions provide them enough of emotional and spiritual food to bear the ordeal of living in a hostile world.

In *The Member of the Wedding*, the symbolism of music and the musical allusions are very closely linked with the theme and feelings evoked. The beat of jazz, the music of the horn, piano and street organ, as well as images involving song and tune “reverberate again and again to evoke a whole range of emotions from frustration and grief to the celebration of joy and fulfilment” (Wikborg, Carson McCullers’ *The Member of the Wedding*, p. 88). The symbol of music operates at various levels in the novel. It is employed to suggest a sense of the grotesque and the bizarre: “The radio in the dining room was playing a mixture of many stations: a war voice crossed with the gabble of an advertiser, and underneath there was the sleazy music of a sweet band” (*The Member*, p. 8). At times it signifies the boredom, anguish and agony of the protagonist: “From some where far away came the sound of whistling and it was a grieving August song that did not end. The minutes were very long” (*The Member*, p. 16). The symbol of music conveys Frankie’s feeling of despair when she stands listening to the tunes of the horn: “the tune returned to the first blues song, and it was like the telling of that long season of trouble. . . . Then, without warning the thing happened that at first Frankie could not believe. Just at the moment when the tune should
be laid, the music finished, a horn broke off. For a moment Frankie could not take it in, she felt so lost” (The Member, p.41). The symbolism of music here operates in a very natural and effortless way and, of course, in a very suggestive manner. The unfinished piece heightens the tension and uncertainty of Frankie’s unsatisfied feelings to a point where she finds it unbearable. The melody’s sudden breaking off withdraws the chance of cathartic release of Frankie’s emotions and leaves her with a “drawn tightness she could no longer stand” (p.41).

The sad tones of the horn echo the sense of longing, sorrow and tension prevailing in Part I of the novel. The motif of the unfinished tune to highlight the sense of frustration is once again used in the part II of the novel: “In the silence of the kitchen they heard the tone shaft quietly across the room, then again the same note was repeated. A piano scale slanted across the August afternoon. A chord was struck. Then in a dreaming way a chain of chords climbed slowly upward like a flight of castle stairs: but just at the end, when the eighth chord should have sounded and the scale made complete, there was a stop. This next to the last chord was repeated. The seventh chord, which seems to echo all of the unfinished scale, struck and insisted again and again. And finally there was a silence” (p.81). The piano tuning is referred to eight times and Berenice, Frankie and John Henry all notice it and talk about it. The unfinished scale acts as a sort of “Objective Correlative”: it denotes Frankie’s “Inner discordance... suspense and frustration of her search for fulfilment” (Wikborg, p.91).

Several critics discern in the unfinished scale a very apt and appropriate mirroring of Frankie’s state of mind characterised by a sense
of frustration and the agony of suspense about her identity and an intense urge to belong and be acceptable. R.M. Cook finds the unfinished scale “the audible equivalent” of Frankie’s emotions of exasperation (Carson McCullers, p. 73) while Evans calls the monotonous - sounding chords analogous to Frankie’s experience of the whole ‘Green and Crazy summer’ which she is anxious to leave behind her (p. 116). It is significant that whenever piano tuning is heard, it disturbs hopeful thoughts and assuring ideas or it follows the defeat of some hope or expectation. For instance the piano scale is heard for the first time when Frankie gets a momentary glimpse of two strangers, mistaking them to be her brother and his bride. The unfinished piano scale is also heard when Berenice engages herself in the tough task of disenchanting Frankie and breaking her vision of the wedding.

The Member is replete with musical allusions evoking the diverse emotions of the protagonist. For instance the oft-repeated conversations between Berenice, Frankie and John Henry have been compared to an “ugly little tune”, “raggedly rhyme said by two crazies”, conveying the boredom which creeps in when life is denied change and excitement and gets locked in a mind-deadening tedium.

At times the symbol of music is employed to indicate the spiritual isolation of the characters notwithstanding their physical proximity: “It is that last last note”, F. Jasmine said. “If you start with A and go on up to G, there is a curious thing that seems to make the difference between G and A all the difference in the world. Twice as much difference as between any other two notes in the scale. Yet they are side by side there on the
piano just as close together as the other notes. Do ray mee fa sol la tee. Tee. Tee. Tee. It could drive you wild” (p. 103).

The symbol of music operates on positive levels too. As R.M.Cook points out, it also “expresses and accompanies feelings of joy, resolution, or profound yearning” (Carson McCullers, p. 73). When Frankie finds the ‘we’ of ‘her’ in her brother’s wedding which is to take place shortly, she feels light, gay, and, above all, spiritually connected with her surroundings and fellow men. These newly sprung up feelings of Frankie are mirrored through musical allusions. Frankie’s dream world is sustained by the “telling of the wedding” — a telling, the contours of which are filled by the rhythms and tones of music. Frankie’s maiden effort to share the euphoria of her newly found affinity in the membership of her brother’s wedding is given musical allusion: “With the telling of the wedding still sounding inside her, as the last chord of a guitar murmurs a long time after the strings are struck” (The Member, p. 54). Thereafter the telling assumes musical character: “The telling of the wedding had an end and a beginning, a shape like a song” (p. 57). R.M. Cook calls the telling of the wedding “a kind of poem or liturgy expressed in the cadences of music” (Carson McCullers, p. 68).

The anticipated membership of the wedding provides Frankie with spiritual support and fulfils her sense of belonging, though for some time only. These feelings are reflected through musical allusions: “A second fact about that day was the forgotten music that sprang suddenly into her mind — snatches of orchestra minutes, march tunes and waltzes, and the jazz horn of Honey Brown — so that her feet in the patent-leather shoes
stepped always according to a tune "(The Member, p.56). A joyful and light-footed Frankie is described as: "But already F. Jasmine, a quick gay band tune marching her feet, was hurrying on her way again" (The Member, p. 57). Berenice, speaking of her first husband Ludie, talks slowly and rhythmically, "making each sentence like a song" (p. 88), thus indicating the joy, beauty and romance of her personal world which is now past, gone and dead. Again Berenice's voice, when she suggests improvements in the world, acquires the hues of a song, indicating the intensity and the fervour of her desires and the depth of her dream world: "And when Berenice spoke of this first principle her voice was a strong deep song that soared and sang in beautiful dark tones leaving an echo in the corners of the room that trembled for a long time until silence" (p. 91).

The symbol of music also signifies togetherness: "Often in the dark, that August, they would all at once begin to sing a Christmas carol, or a song like the Slitbelly Blues. Sometimes they knew in advance that they would sing, and they would agree on the tune among themselves" (p. 116). At times music heightens harmony in separateness: "Or again, they would disagree and start off on three different songs at once, until at last the tunes began to merge and they sang a special music that the three of them made up together. John Henry sang in a high wailing voice . . . Berenice's voice was dark and definite and deep . . . The old Frankie sang up and down the middle space between John Henry and Berenice, so that their three voices were joined, and the parts of the song were woven together" (The Member, p. 116). Each of the singing trio has a different song and a different voice and different manner of singing which expresses his
individuality yet these differences merge together and transcend the individual level. This passage brings to a reader’s mind the final passage of McCullers’ The Ballad in which the “twelve mortal men” join in a song which is “both somber and joyful” (p. 71). In fact Wikborg finds the singing together of the kitchen trio equivalent to the coda of The Ballad (Carson McCullers’ The Member of the Wedding, pp. 93-94).

The symbol of music operates on minor levels too: Berenice has a “dark jazz, voice” but John Henry’s is “bright and high”, a “jazz sadness” grips Frankie on her solitary walks through the town; a horn in the neighbourhood is described as having danced into a wild jazz spangle that zigzagged upward with sorry nigger trickiness.

In no other novel of McCullers, does music play such a significant and vital role as in The Member. The onus of evoking, developing and intensifying the emotions experienced by the trio of the novel especially those of the protagonist falls on the symbolic aspect of the music. In R.M. Cook’s words, in “one form or another music carries much of the emotion of this book. As a communication of the heart below the level of speech and action it suggests a non-wordly realm where feelings rather than facts are absolute” (Carson McCullers, p. 74). Oliver Evans aptly points out that the musical elements are not merely a matter of structure as here the themes are suggested, stated, and restated in the manner of a sonata or a symphony and the story contains a coda but “the whole atmosphere of the book is charged with musical meanings. The dialogue is full of strategic repetitions which suggest refrains in music, and the total effect is
reminiscent of the group-singing of certain folk ballads in the South" (The

In The Ballad McCullers once again relies on the symbolic use of
music to convey the hidden meaning. In the epilogue entitled “The
Twelve Mortal Men” a chain gang sings in a chorus:

“All day there is the sound of the picks striking into the clay
earth, hard sunlight, the smell of sweat. And every day there is
music. One dark voice will start a phrase, half-sung, and like a
question. And after a moment another voice will join in, soon
the whole gang will be singing. The voices are dark in the golden
glare, the music intricately blended, both somber and joyful. The
music will swell until at last it seems that the sound does not
come from the twelve men on the gang, but from the earth itself,
or the wide sky. It is music that causes the heat to broaden and
the listener to grow cold with ecstasy and fright” (p. 71).

The passage carries the whole message of McCullers’ work in a very
effective, forceful and poetic manner, raising it to a universal level. The
novelist uses music to present her perception of the human condition—a
condition wherein people experience a terrible isolation which is mitigated
for some time when they are drawn together as a community of suffering
with some sense of harmony, even of joy.

In the main text of the novella, shortly before bringing Macy back
into Amelia’s life which ultimately ruins her, McCullers creates an
atmosphere where tension, uncertainty and frustration mounts and for this
she once again relies on the symbolic use of music: “Somewhere in the
darkness a woman sang in a high wild voice and the tune had no start and no finish and was made up of only three notes which went on and on and on" (The Ballad, p. 41).

In McCullers' fiction the symbols of ice and snow are associated with the world of romance, beauty and desire. "A lot of times the plans about the things that were going to happen to her were mixed up with ice and snow. Sometimes it was like she was out in Switzerland and all the mountains were covered with snow and she was skating on cold, greenish-colored ice" (The Heart, p. 82). The symbol of ice and snow also denotes spiritual affinity and emotional comradeship: "Mister Singer would be skating with her. And maybe Carole Lombard or Arturo Toscanini who played on the radio. They would be skating together" (p. 82). The symbolism of ice and snow assumes significance in the light of the fact that both Mr. Singer and radio hold a very high spiritual status in Mick's vision of life: Singer provides her spiritual sustenance while the radio, through music, gives strong support to Mick's dream world of beauty and hope. For Mick, a life in a land where it snows, is a life where everything is love, understanding and emotional rapport and the harsh, crippling realities and discordant notes recede into distance: "In the bed at night she planned about how she was an orphan and lived with Mister Singer - just the two of them in a foreign house where in the winter it would snow. Maybe in a little Switzerland town with the high glaciers and the mountains all around" (p. 207). Mick's irresistible longing for snow is, in fact, her irress pressible desire for beauty, romance and companionship. "Snow', Mick said, "That's what I want to see. Cold, white drifts of snow like in
pictures. Blizzards. White, cold snow that keeps falling soft and falls on and on and on through all the winter. Snow like in Alaska” (p. 234).

It is significant that John Singer, the only person whom Mick loves and who provides her the emotional and the spiritual prop, has been to a place where it snows: “Once he travelled to Ontario, Canada - across the river from Detroit. Canada was so far up north that the white snow drifted up to the roofs of the houses. ... And far up in the north there were deep forests and white ice igloos. The arctic region with the beautiful northern lights” (p. 263).

Frankie Addams also associates snow, ice and cold places with beauty and companionship. Thinking of her brother of whose wedding she is going to be a member, Frankie dreams of snow: “But Alaska! Frankie had dreamed of it constantly, and especially this summer it was very real. She saw the snow and frozen sea and ice glaciers. Esquimau igloos and polar bears and the beautiful Northern lights” (The Member, p. 4-5). In fact, Frankie is so enamoured of snow that she keeps a glass globe with snow inside that could be shaken into a snow storm and a seashell in her room and while tinkering with this globe, she is transported into the realm of beauty, acceptance and romance: “When she held the seashell to her ear, she could hear the warm wash of the Gulf of Mexico, and think of a green palm island far away. And she could hold the snow globe to her narrowed eyes and watch the whirling white flakes fall until they blinded her. She dreamed of Alaska. She walked up a cold white hill and looked on a snowy wasteland far below. She watched the sun make colors in the

* Spellings as they appear in the text.
ice, and heard dream voices, saw dream things. And everywhere there was
the cold white gentle snow” (p. 9-10).

Singer, the only person whom Mick loves and who seems to be the
redeeming feature of an otherwise nearly defeating life for Mick, is the
one who has seen snow and ice and spent some time in the snowy region of
the North. Like Singer, Ludie Freeman, is the only one out of Berenice’s
four husbands who had seen snow and had been to a cold place. “Berenice
and Ludie Freeman had seen a whole winter of Northern Snow. They
loved each other” (The Member, p. 25).

Among the other symbols used by McCullers is the symbol of eyes. In
McCullers’ fiction, eyes portray the inner state of the characters, reveal
their deep-seated feelings and register their subjective feelings and
emotions. Through the symbolic use of the eyes, McCullers seeks to
heighten the thematic concerns of her fiction. Singer’s eyes are described
as “many-tinted and gentle” (p.81); again Singer’s image of “home-made
God” is perpetuated through the symbol of the eyes: “His [Singer’s] eyes
made a person think that he heard things nobody else had ever heard, that
he knew things no one had guessed before. He did not seem quite human”
(The Heart, p. 20): “Singer’s eyes were the only things in the room that
did not seem to move. They were varied in colour, flecked with amber,
gray and a soft brown. He [Jake] stared at them so long that he almost
hypnotized himself. He lost the urge to be riotous and felt calm again. The
eyes seemed to understand all that he had meant to say and to hold some
message for him” (The Heart, p. 59): “One by one they would come to
Singer’s room to spend the evening with him. The mute was always
thoughtful and composed. His many-tinted gentle eyes were grave as a sorcerer's" (p.81).

In *Reflections* the symbolic use of eyes is inextricably linked with the theme and vision of the novelist. The image of the eye focuses on a certain view of life as conceived by the novelist. The image is supplied by Anacleto while describing a painting done by him: “A peacock of a sort of ghastly green. With one immense golden eye” (p. 95). R.M. Cook rightly remarks that the image that best characterises the novel’s vision of human nature is the one contained in its title *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (Carson McCullers, p. 58).

At times, the symbol of eyes is used to indicate a sense of spiritual affinity. Frankie, remembering her visit to the freak show, says, “it seemed to her that they [the freaks] had looked at her in a secret way and tried to connect their eyes with hers as though to say: we know you” (*The Member*, p. 18). During her long trip into town a day before the wedding, Frankie feels a spiritual closeness with others including an old coloured man driving a blinkered mule for the Saturday market: “F. Jasmine looked at him, he looked at her . . . But in that glance, F. Jasmine felt between his eyes and her own eyes a new unnamable connection, as though they were known to each other and here even came an instant vision of his home field and country roads and quiet dark pine trees as the wagon rattled past her on the paved town street” (*The Member*, p. 50).

If on the one hand, the symbol of eyes is used to convey spiritual affinity, it has also been used for its opposite effect i.e. to portray the
spiritual isolation of the characters. In The Heart Harry is a Jew and is without any emotional and spiritual support like friendship, understanding and love. Harry's spiritual isolation is represented by his being cross-eyed: “Once his eyes got crossed and stayed crossed for a year. He would sit out on his front steps with his hands between his knees and watch everything. Very quiet and cross-eyed” (The Heart, p. 212).

Again, Amelia's isolation is represented through the symbol of eyes. From the very beginning, we find Amelia a lonely and solitary person and this is stressed through her eyes which are crossed. Marvin Macy's vanishing trick, after stealing Amelia’s love, leaves her completely shattered. The wheel of isolation turns full circle. Amelia’s isolation is symbolically conveyed: her eyes which had always been crossed, “slowly day by day were more crossed and it was as though they sought each other out to exchange a little glance of grief and lonely recognition” (The Ballad, p. 70).

The motif of eyes is also employed by McCullers to hint at the realm of the hidden, inner desires bringing out their strange and incongruous nature. Berenice, the Negro cook, chooses a blue glass eye to replace the eye gouged out by one of her husbands. Later on in the novel we learn that the main source of Berenice’s anguish and agony is the racial discrimination. As a black, she has known, seen and experienced the racial discrimination. Her choice of the blue eye glass seems to be a kind of vicarious fulfilment of her desire to break the racial barrier. It is to quote Marguerite Young “a terrible commentary on the color line, and the arbitrary divisions which shut people off from each other” ("Metaphysical
Fiction,” p. 152). Like Frankie’s dream of the impossible wedding, Berenice’s dream world of love, understanding and perfection, is one without colour and race and this dream is symbolically represented by her blue glass eye. Berenice’s description of the world, she would create as “Holy Lord God”, is without “separate colored people. . . but all human beings would be light brown color with blue eyes and black hair” (p. 91).

Berenice’s blue glass eye clearly shows that however mature, worldly wise, down to earth and sane a person may appear on the surface level, he has his dream-world and fantasies. Berenice, with all her practical wisdom and sanity, fails to see that the blue glass eye disagrees with her dark skin and that it makes her appearance strange.

Wikborg is of the view that many literal details concerned with the blue glass eye in the novel (p. 25 and 31) “effectively counterbalance its symbolic weight and give play to the wryly humorous side of Berenice’s strange appearance” (Carson McCullers’ The Member of the Wedding, p. 77).

VII

The Southern writing has by tradition been preoccupied with images and words. McCullers, a Southern to the core, relies a good deal on different kinds of imagery to intensify the motif of isolation in her work. It is through her imagery that she attempts to embody all abstractions and generalisations about character and meaning of her works. The imagery in
McCullers' fiction cannot be limited to any class or category: it is rather functional and as such the novelist chooses it from any realm wherever she finds it meaningful like animal imagery (The Reflections, The Ballad), imagery from the world of nature (The Member), imagery of towns, world, etc (The Ballad, The Member). Everywhere we find McCullers' imagery apt, pertinent and relevant so far as its efficacy in re-inforcing the theme is concerned.

McCullers often employs the imagery of sun, heat and glare to denote boredom, frustration and loneliness. In McCullers' fiction heat is pervasive and takes on an "atmospheric quality". It is to be noted that all the climactic events of The Heart like Mick giving up her music, her "inner room" for drudgrey at a ten-cent store, Antonapoulos' death, Singer's suicide, Copeland's abandoning of his "strong, true purpose" and Blount's flight from the town after racial violence — all are set in the months of summer when the glaring sun and the relentless heat intensify the general climate of isolation and loneliness. Jake Blount's desire to help the workers is frustrated and he reveals this frustration: "It was like trying to fight darkness or heat or a stink in the air" (The Heart, p. 244). A bright sun depresses Jake, reawakens the feeling of loneliness in him and makes him tense: "The days grew longer and the sun was bright. The lazy warmth depressed him. He began to drink... And yet beneath his inertia Jake felt the old tension. Of all the places he had been this was the loneliest town of all" (p. 244).

The utter loneliness, the hopeless emptiness and the dismal isolation which drives John Singer to suicide is symbolised in the heat of
the sun: “For a while he rambled with bent head along the streets. But the unrefracted brilliance of the sun, the humid heat, oppressed him. He returned to his rooms with swollen eyes and an aching head... he brought out a pistol from his pocket and put a bullet in his chest” (p. 280).

At Singer’s funeral, all the four major characters who had placed their emotional burdens on Singer, taking him to be their spiritual saviour, are benumbed at his suicide. Their emotional emptiness and spiritual void is suggested through the imagery of heat and sun. “The funeral was at noon. The sun burned down on them with savage heat as they stood around the open dank grave. The flowers curled and turned brown in the sun” (p. 306). In a dream, which signifies Blount’s failure to better the condition of the workers, the imagery of sun and heat is employed: “The dream was still heavy in his mind... He had been walking among a great crowd of people — like at the show... There was a terrible bright sun and the people were half-naked. They were silent and slow and their faces had a look in them of starvation” (p. 297).

Mick finds the circumstances of her life quite unpromising. Extreme poverty presses her down. She loses her friendship with George. The afraid and spiritually starved Mick’s state of mind is reflected in the heat: “The days were long and hot... It was as though in some way she was waiting — but what she waited for she did not know. The sun burned down glaring and white-hot in the streets” (p. 270).

The imagery of sun, heat and glare is quite prominent in The Member. Since the novel concentrates on Frankie’s experiences of
frustration and loneliness and no other issues like poverty, racial injustice are involved, the imagery of heat and sun is intense in its suggestiveness. In fact, the novel is timed in summer, in the abundance of heat and summer: "It happened that green and crazy summer when Frankie was twelve years old. This was the summer when for a long time she had not been a member... In June the trees were bright dizzy green... and the town turned black and shrunken under the glare of the Sun... The sidewalks of the town were grey in the early morning and at night, but the noon sun put a glaze on them, so that the cement burned and glittered like glass. The sidewalks finally became too hot for Frankie's feet, and also she got herself in trouble" (p. 1).

McCullers employs the imagery of sultry air, stink and foul odour to indicate the rotten state of spiritual isolation. Singer experiences an acute sense of loneliness while writing to his friend. His spiritual stagnation is indicated through imagery: "He (Singer) sat for a long while, erect and tense, without continuing the letter. Then he stood up and lighted himself a cigarette. The room was cold and the air had a sour stale odor" (p. 182). Jake's dream to uplift the workers ends in a general brawl. A frustrated Jake faces the dreaded state of loneliness which is suggested through imagery: "And this fight nobody could have stopped. It seemed to blaze up out of nothing... Half the crowd was drunk that afternoon... The heat and the sun were sickening and there was a heavy stink in the air (p. 288). Jake in a desperate bid to find some support for his mission tries to locate Dr. Copeland who has already left the town to live with his wife's relatives. Jake's stifling isolation is reflected through imagery: "outside
the air was sultry and there was a foul odor in the street. Clouds had formed in the sky. The atmosphere was so still that the smoke from a mill in the district went up in a straight, unbroken line" (p. 293).

In The Member, McCullers employs the image of the world to portray Frankie's state of mind: “The world is a sudden place” (p.14). “She thought of the world, and it was fast and loose and turning, faster and loser and bigger than ever it had been before” (p. 34). “It was the day when, from the beginning, the world seemed no longer separate from herself and when all at once she felt included” (p. 44). “Today she did not see the world as loose and cracked and turning a thousand miles an hour, so that the spinning views of war and distant lands made her mind dizzy. The world had never been so close to her” (p. 66). “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” (p. 67). “The world was now so far away that Frances could no longer think of it. She did not see the earth as in the old days, cracked and loose and turning a thousand miles an hour; the earth was enormous and still and flat” (p. 148). All these images re-inforce Frankie's sense of isolation, belonging, inclusion and disappointment respectively.

At times McCullers chooses her images from very ordinary situations but the images forcefully and movingly depict the plight of the human beings. In The Member the biscuit man prepared by John Henry is one such image. John Henry takes great care and pains to carve out a perfect little biscuit man. He works carefully with the dough and puts raisins at the right places to keep everything in proportion. But when the
biscuit man emerged from the oven, "It had swelled so that all the work of John Henry had been cooked out, the fingers were run together, and the walking stick resembled a sort of tail" (p. 8). The fate of the biscuit man symbolises the human situation. The oven bakes the biscuit man into a grotesque looking object. Similarly, the world with all its malevolent and crude forces, throws sensitive souls into the furnace of loneliness turning them into grotesque creatures. "They dare not enter such a world lest their personalities be 'cooked out'," remarks R.M. Cook (Carson McCullers, p. 126).

Antonapoulos and Singer lead a quiet life of togetherness for nearly ten years till Antonapoulos falls sick and takes to strange behaviour. Fearing that Antonapoulos might become a permanent public nuisance, his cousin arranges him to be sent to an asylum. It leaves Singer spiritually broken and emotionally drained. McCullers hints it through subtle imagery in a letter which Singer writes to his friend: "Do you remember the big oak tree in front? The branches were cut back so as not to interfere with the telephone wires and the tree died. The limbs are rotten and there is a hollow place in the trunk" (p. 182). Here the Oak tree symbolises John Singer, the branches represent Antonapoulos while the hollow place in the trunk of the tree refers to the void created by Antonapoulos’ exit. The phrase ‘the tree died’ alludes to Singer’s emotional and spiritual death in the figurative sense after he is separated from Antonapoulos.

In her effort to convey the vision embodied in Reflections, McCullers relies heavily on imagery. The novel originates from a
restricted, incomplete and distorted vision which when allowed to prevail and guide the course of life becomes a destructive force. The novelist employs such images as can convey the fragmented vision of life. Fierce eyes, fiery shafts of sunshine, strange colours of sunlight, darkness, changing and unusual patterns of shadows, clouds and stars, flashes of light and the swift movement of the objects help the novelist impart a blurred and distorted vision to the lives of the characters.

There is the other side of the imagery too—at times it conveys the sense of beauty. During his ride on Firebird, the Captain perceives momentary flashes of beauty and life in nature. As the horse gallops, tearing Penderton's skin on pine cones, the Captain fails to retain his sense of proportion. Clinging to the horse sideways, he watches his surroundings from a peculiar angle. “His eyes were glassy and half-open, as in delirium, but he saw suddenly as he had never seen before. The world was a kaleidoscope, and each of the multiple visions which he saw impressed itself on his mind with burning vividness. On the ground half-buried in the leaves there was a little flower, dazzling white and beautifully wrought. A thorny pine cone, the flight of a bird in the blue windy sky, a fiery shaft of sunshine in the green gloom . . . He was conscious of the pure keen air” (Reflections, p. 76). Here the imagery of glassy, half-open eyes, the kaleidoscopic and multiple visions, dazzling white and beautifully wrought flower, half-buried in the leaves, the flight of a bird in the blue windy sky, a fiery shaft of sunshine and pure keen air, portrays the mystic vision, the Captain experiences.
At times, McCullers employs certain images which sharply and effectively focus on the emotional isolation of the characters. When Private Williams fails to properly carry out Captain Penderton's instructions and cuts off the down-sweeping limbs of the Oak tree, we find Captain Penderton in great agitation for it exposes the woods to Captain's view, something which he dreads. The Captain's desire to shut-off the woods symbolises his desire to shut-off the animal energy from his life. This denial of energy becomes a blight, a calamity and a catastrophe for the Captain and makes him thoroughly isolated man. His spiritual emptiness is conveyed to us through intellectual imagery: "Standing alone in the woods he was a small man" (Reflections, p. 8), writes McCullers. Oliver Ewans too finds this image symbolic of the Captain's "insignificance in the vital realm" (The Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 68).

The Captain's attempt to ride Firebird ends in a miserable and humiliating failure which, in fact, is the Captain's failure to master the vital energy. The Captain's agony at his failure is sharp and intense as of all the people, it is witnessed by Private Williams. McCullers portrays the Captain's plight with a very forceful image "the Captain looked like a broken doll that has been thrown away" (Reflections, p. 78). Oliver Evans finds this image as "marvellously just: the Captain, because of his lack of life, is a mere imitation of a man" (The Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 68).

After killing Private Williams, the Captain slumps against the wall. Describing him through imagery, McCullers writes: "In his queer, coarse wrapper he resembled a broken and dissipated monk" (Reflections, p. 213).
The image of monk, used for the Captain, is ingenious for among other things the Captain has an ascetic streak in his personality and he represents “the man of will in contrast to Williams, the man of nature, and in contrast also to his wife and Major Langdon who are sensual and easy-going types” (Evans, p. 65).

Though imagery plays a pivotal role in embodying the abstractions of McCullers’ vision and themes into a concrete, alive and suggestive writings in all her novels yet the fact remains that The Ballad relies very heavily on its imagery for the portrayal of its world and the delineation of the situations and characters. The imagery is so interwoven into the artistic creation of the novelist’s vision that the whole vision embodied in the work collapses or gets distorted if its imagery is tinkered with.

Cousin Lyndon is incessantly clothed in animal and bird imagery. As he is to act the sinister role of a treacherous beloved, he is described in animal terms. At the outset he is described as “A calf got loose” (p. 6). Later he is compared to magpie (p. 36); “the child of a swamphaunt” (p. 50); “a swamp mosquito” (p. 59) and a hawk (p. 68). Lyndon’s hands are compared to “dirty sparrow claws” (p. 8) and his fluttering eye-lids look like “pale, trapped moths” (p. 49). When the fight between Amelia and Marvin Macy is about to come to a decisive end in favour of Amelia, Lyndon springs forward and sails through the air “as though he had grown hawk wings” (p. 68).

“Literature”, said the French symbolist poet Paul Valery, “is the art of playing on the minds of others.” In this art, McCullers endeavours to
achieve maximum effects on all levels of the central experience embodied in her work by conjoining to her raw-material, the elements of grotesque, violence, irony, realism, symbolism, imagery, structural skill and a functional style, achieving thematic, structural, symbolic and temporal unity. But above all is her imagination — an imagination born out of compassion and love for the fellow-beings and their situation. McCullers’ art is a beautiful blend of imagination, conception and technique portraying her metaphorical truth of the human situation.
NOTES AND REFERENCES


3 Ibid.

4 Ibid; p. 347.


6 A part of McCullers' letter to Reeves quoted by Oliver Evans in The Ballad of Carson McCullers, p. 100.

7 Millichap as quoted by Wikborg in Carson McCullers' The Member of the Wedding, p. 64.

8 Zola quoted by David Madden in A Primer of the Novel, p. 167.


16 Millichap "The Realistic Structure of The Heart is a Lonely Hunter," p. 15.

17 Dayton Kohler, "Variations on a Theme," p. 3.


22 As quoted by David Madden in A Primer of The Novel, p. 101.