# 19 CRITICS DISCUSS

## Carson McCullers

## (1917-1967)

"Carson's major theme: the huge importance and nearly insoluble problems of human love."

Tennessee Williams

"Moving, yes, but a minor author. And broken by illness at such a young age."

Arthur Miller
[judging a rival]

"One of the few satisfying achievements of our second-rate culture."

Gore Vidal
[bitter that he is not more appreciated]

"Miss McCullers and perhaps Mr. Faulkner are the only writers since the death of D. H. Lawrence with an original poetic sensibility. I prefer Miss McCullers to Mr. Faulkner because she writes more clearly; I prefer her to D. H. Lawrence because she has no message."

Graham Greene

"With subtlety and power, with suggestions and forthright statements, by means of well realized characters and revealing episodes, Mrs. McCullers circles her theme, coming closer and closer to its core, until she has encompassed and exposed its meaning. The task she set herself called for more than mere narrative skill, more than effective dramatic technique, and she has met its requirements with remarkable success. But narrative skill and dramatic episodes speed the reader on his way, while sudden, surprising insights illumine it. The author is never commonplace: used props, stock characters, and worn literary counters have no place in her writing."

Ben Ray Redman
*Saturday Review*
(8 June 1940) 6

"It is always exciting to discover a new, real talent in writing. Or a new real talent for characterization. Or a new and genuine gift of understanding. Twenty-two-year-old Carson McCullers has all three. She has written a novel that is baffling in a way. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is not the kind of novel you expect a young woman to write; it is a story of pitiful people told without any touch of sentimentality, giving each one the dignity that is his in his own eyes....One wonders how any young person could know so much about the lonely hearts of men, women, and children too."

Lorine Pruette
*New York Herald Tribune*
(9 June 1940) 4

"Maturity does not cover the quality of her work. It is something beyond that, something more akin to the vocation of pain to which a great poet is born. Reading her, one feels this girl is wrapped in knowledge which has roots beyond the span of her life and her experience. How else can she so surely plumb the hearts of characters as strange and, under the force of her creative shaping, as real as she presents.... Carson McCullers is a full-fledged novelist whatever her age. She writes with a sweep and certainty that are overwhelming."

Rose Field
*New York Times*
(16 June 1940) 6

"Miss McCullers's picture of loneliness, death, accident, insanity, fear, mob violence and terror is perhaps the most desolate that has so far come from the South. Her quality of despair is unique and individual; and it seems to me more natural and authentic than that of Faulkner. Her groping characters live in a world more completely lost than any Sherwood Anderson ever dreamed of. And she recounts incidents of death and attitudes of stoicism in sentences whose neutrality makes Hemingway's terse prose warm and partisan by comparison."

Richard Wright
*New Republic*
(5 August 1940) 195

"No one could say...that Miss McCullers has not succeeded in making her genuine talent felt, a talent which is less of subtlety than of infant-terrible insight expressed with quite grown-up precision, as yet unmellowed and unhallowed. It should not be forced in order to take advantage of a passing vogue, for it will surely crack up in the hurly-burly of competition. It is a brave talent; but not, I think, a very sturdy plant. It calls for gentle handling and careful cultivation."

Fred T. Marsh
*New York Times*
(2 March 1941) 6

"She immediately achieved great critical prominence with her first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), in which a deaf-mute in a Southern town loses his only friend, another mute, and turns to others who give him their confidence, such as a lonely, music-loving girl, a black doctor, and a young radical. It was appreciated for its compassionate treatment of individualism and its sensitive style, and also because it was considered a symbolic commentary on fascism.

Her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), is a shorter work, a macabre story of experiences in an army camp in the South before World War II [Fort Benning, Georgia]. *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) with great sensitivity presents the feelings of a 12-year-old girl on the occasion of her brother's impending wedding, and was successfully dramatized by the author in 1950. Her next work was also a play, *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1958), about the maturing of a woman twice married and twice deserted by the same husband. Her next novel, *Clock Without Hands* (1961), set in a small Georgia town, treats the involvement of some whites and a black boy, thereby illuminating her common theme, the discovery of selfhood. *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1951) collects stories and novels, the title work being dramatized by Edward Albee (1963), and *The Mortgaged Heart* (1971) collects early stories."

James D. Hart
*The Oxford Companion to American Literature*, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83)

"Her gifts are limited--as Virginia Woolf's were limited, or Glenway Wescott's. I do not mention these writers casually, or because I am unfamiliar with them. Like them both, Mrs. McCullers, though operating in a narrow field, ploughs deep furrows. Like them both, if I may pursue the metaphor, she engages in what Southerners used to call intensive cultivation. The trick about intensive cultivation...is that the earth runs sterile. Such, surely, was the fate of Mrs. Woolf and Mr. Wescott. Up to the moment Mrs. McCullers has not thus been cursed. She does not, of course, write the kind of gleaming, perfect prose Mrs. Woolf was capable of. But hers is beautifully fitted to her purposes, and that, I suppose, is what good writing means."

Francis Downing
Commonweal
(24 May 1945) 148

"She is a suggestive rather than an eloquent writer, and often seems to present us less with a meaning than with a hint. And yet the lines of her work are clear and firm....Though she has an acute observation, she does not use it to make rounded people....Carson McCullers's work has always seemed to me to be a form of self-dramatization....She does not dramatize herself in…that she is merely autobiographical; but

she does dramatize herself in the sense that she seems to invest the various sides of her personality with attributes skillfully collected from the outside world."

George Dangerfield
*Saturday Review*
(30 March 1946) 15

"There were affinities in the fiction of John Hawkes and William Burroughs with nightmare and surrealism, which in turn blended into the grotesque visions of Flannery O'Connor, James Purdy, and Carson McCullers....The most productive centers of postwar fiction in America were situated in the Gentile, rural South of Carson McCullers, Truman Capote, Flannery O'Connor, Peter Taylor, and William Styron, and in the Jewish, urban North of Saul Bellow, J. D. Salinger, Norman Mailer, Harvey Swados, Bernard Malamud, and Philip Roth....The case of Singer, the deaf-mute who stands at the center of McCullers' first novel, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) is perhaps [most] apposite. Singer is the town legend and its dumb confessor; at times he takes upon himself the sorrows of others, playing the role of an unwilling Christ for men he is powerless to redeem. That Singer is only an ironic parallel to Christ is evident from his suicide. His death produces a debacle in the life of others. Clearly, the failures of the Christlike and of the Faustian hero were equally drastic. And the desire for self-transcendence in both was urgent....

Her conception of grotesques seeking to transcend their spiritual isolation in love was one of the important images of the times....*The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1951), perhaps her best work, and *Clock Without Hands* (1961), which did not live up to her previous fiction. With her the Southern tradition of the Gothic novel was refined into a firm poetic language, and into a sensibility, essentially feminine, which did not escape imitation and misuse."

Ihab Hassan
*Literary History of the United States*, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1420-23

"The art of Carson McCullers has been called 'Gothic.' Perhaps it is--superficially. Certainly her day-to-day world, her little Southern towns, are haunted by far more masterful horrors than were ever conjured up in the dreary castles of a Horace Walpole. It seems to me, however, that the 'Gothic' label misses the essential point. Because Carson McCullers is ultimately the artist functioning at the very loftiest symbolic level, and if one must look for labels, I should prefer to call her work 'metaphysical.' Behind the strange and horrible in her world there are played out the most somber tragedies of the human spirit; her mutes, her hunchbacks, speak of complexities and frustrations which are so native to man that they can only be recognized, perhaps, in the shock which comes from seeing them dressed in the robes of grotesques. They pass upon the street everyday but we only notice them when they drag a foot as they go by."

William P. Clancey
*Commonweal*
(15 June 1951) 243

"Since all her novels represent some kind of variation on the one theme of human loneliness, a knowledge of her treatment of this theme is necessary to understand the purpose and cast of her writing. We should not take it for granted, however, that her work is in any way systematic or mechanical. Her way is not the course of allegory...but the way of myth. She is, after all, a novelist haunted by the elusive nature of human truth, and her underlying theme gives coherence to the variety and surprises she has found in the world about her."

Dayton Kohler
*English Journal*
(October 1951) 421-2

"The same fundamental pattern exists in all Mrs. McCullers's major prose works. The pattern is more elaborate in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* than elsewhere, but the beginnings of it are recognizable in her first novel and its evolution has occupied the whole of her literary career. It is a closed pattern, and one which many readers will view with a reluctance which is a measure of their suspicion that it is, after all,

authentic...But it is a pattern with a strange vision of life which Carson McCullers has attained in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*; an eternal flaw exists in the machinery of love which alone has the power to liberate man from his fate of spiritual isolation."

Oliver Evans
*New World Writing*
(April 1952) 310

"She was an American legend from the beginning, which is to say that her fame was as much a creation of publicity as of talent. The publicity was the work of those fashion magazines where a dish of black-eyed peas can be made to seem the roe of some rate fish, photographed by Avedon; yet McCullers' dreaming androgynous face, looking out at us from glossy pages, in its icon elegance subtly confounding the chic of the lingerie ads all about her. Unlike too many other 'legends,' her talent was as real as her face….Her prose was chaste and severe and realistic."

Gore Vidal
*The Reporter*
(28 September 1961) 50

"Since the publication of The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter in 1940, when its author was only twenty-three years old, Carson McCullers has been recognized as one of the most likely talents in the South. The next decade, which remains the most productive of her career, saw her established as an important writer who brought strange and artful gifts of sensibility to the contemporary novel. The strangeness, however, reminded some readers of Poe's artifices, and it persuaded them to discredit her fiction as simply Gothic. The judgment is at best hasty.

It is true that Mrs. McCullers lacks the scope, strength, and fury of Faulkner, lacks his dark apprehension of the Southern past and his profound insight into the American wilderness, symbols both of our guilt and innocence. And it is also true that Mrs. McCullers, hypnotized as she seems to be by the burning point where love and pain secretly meet, forgoes a certain richness of surface which, let us say, Eudora Welty seldom misses. Still, the Gothic element, the personal principle in Mrs. McCullers' work, excludes none of the larger aspects of the Southern tradition to which it belongs....Being both Protestant and Gothic, her imagination derives its peculiar force from a transcendental idea of spiritual loneliness....

To say that Mrs. McCullers has a Gothic penchant is but to note, and note superficially, her interest in the grotesque, the freakish, and the incongruous. Such qualities, to be sure, exert a large influence on the contemporary imagination. There is another sense, however, in which the Gothic element may be defined more pertinently. The Gothic insists on spiritualization, the spiritualization of matter itself, and it insists upon subjectivism....Mrs. McCullers can be said to celebrate the lonely and the outcast, the frail children of the earth...Adolescents and freaks are her rueful heroes because the first are as yet uninitiated and the latter are forever unacceptable; both do not belong, and in both physical incompleteness is the source of a qualitative, a spiritual difference. And lonely as her characters are, encased as they are in their teeming dreams...their actions serve only to intensify their solitude....

To love is to suffer, to intensify one's loneliness. Love needs no reciprocation; its quality is determined solely by the lover; and its object can be as 'outlandish' as the world may offer. Hence the grotesque nature of the objects of love in Carson McCullers' fiction: hunchbacks, deaf mutes, weddings, clouds. Hence also the de-sexualization of love since the love relation, often incongruous, does not admit of sexual communion. 'By nature all people are both sexes,' Mrs. McCullers says. 'So that marriage and the bed is not all by any means.' Singer, Brannon, Penderton, Amelia, and the men-women freaks who appear in her fiction are all bi-sexual, which is to say a-sexual....

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter, 1940, the first of Mrs. McCullers' books and the longest, anticipates in many ways the power and ambiguities of her achievement.... Its events hark back to the economic distress of the thirties and reverberate with the distant echoes of Nazi tyranny, and its spirit shudders with the 'strangled South.' But it is from the singular relation of the characters to one another that the book takes shape. What makes the relations singular, literally, is that they are all centripetal: all the characters are singly drawn towards one man, the deaf-mute, Singer, who stands bewilderedly at the center. The novel's

structure is broken up to convey the sense of 'mutual isolation'; each person remains in a padded cubicle, victimized by the very dreams which nourish his dignity....The presence of pain, the failure of initiation, the betrayal of love, and the horror of solitude--these somehow define the tragic confrontation with reality which Mrs. McCullers chooses for her characters....

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter is addressed to some wide social and religious issues, and it is at the same time deeply concerned with the secret issues of the soul. Yet the nexus between the soft private thing and the world of pogroms and economic exploitation is never firmly established, just as the nexus between Singer's love for the Greek and the Christian idea of redemption is never made convincing. The metaphor of the freak as sacrificial hero cannot hold the novel together, and neither can the style, which vacillates between a perception of things as they are and a feeling of things as they are hoped to be....

Reflections in a Golden Eye, 1941, is a starker tale. It shares with Mrs. McCullers' best work, The Ballad of the Sad Cafe, the atmosphere of primitive terror, 'that Sense of The Awful which is the desperate black root of nearly all significant modern art, from the Guernica of Picasso to the cartoons of Charles Addams,' as Tennessee Williams, who ought to know, has put it in his Introduction to the book....The novelette renders a world of stealthy, chaotic feelings in a lapidary style, poetic through the precision of its implications; the grotesque aberrations of the characters involved are reflected in a cold and steady mirror of which the disquieting symbol is a peacock's eye. 'A peacock of ghastly green'....The Golden Eye only reflects; it does not see. The various personages move towards an inexorable fate, which is itself a product of their instinctual necessities, in a manner reminiscent of Paul Bowles' somnambulist creations....

In The Member of the Wedding, 1946, Carson McCullers exhibits the kind of formal unity which her first novel lacks. There is also a smarting sense of life in the work, a profound sense of change, and a quality of intense groping which the behavior of the central character seeks continually to incarnate. The story is primarily that of Frankie Addams, a motherless, twelve-year-old girl engaged in a romance with the world. The agonies of growth, the search for identity, the paradoxical desire to escape, to experience, to belong, suddenly converge on Frankie on the occasion of her brother's wedding, which becomes the intolerable symbol of all her longings and the focus of her perverse misunderstanding of the adult world....

The characters of The Ballad of the Sad Cafe are both metaphors and grotesques...The plot moves in the familiar pattern of a whirligig spinning out the impossible intricacies of love and pain; and the style, unconscious of its power, transforms this eccentric tale into something as universal as the old ballads about love and dread, revenge and madness....The novelette sets a high standard of performance for Mrs. McCullers and gives authority to a certain Gothic vision, at once quaint and elemental, stark and involuted, which writers like Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams have been inclined to explore....Many readers will regret that no one in the novelette seems to have full access to his experience, to have any ultimate or even provisional understanding of it. In a sense, the work denies the possibility of recognition, and denies, therefore, the dramatic equivalent of illumination. It is the envoy, the style of anonymous celebration and immitigable sadness, that raises the work to the condition of a haunting performance....

The themes of Mrs. McCullers' stories are familiar to readers of her novels, their manner far less distinguished--too often they seem nerveless, contrived. But her deficiencies in the short form remind us only more acutely of her mastery in the intermediate scope of the novelette....If in its modern adversity the imagination of Mrs. McCullers has focused on man's aloneness and sought the ambience of his decay, it has done so less in the spirit of Poe than in that of Poe's admirer, Baudelaire, to whom 'fright' and 'ecstasy' were household words."

Ihab H. Hassan<br>"Carson McCullers:<br>The Alchemy of Love and the Aesthetics of Pain"<br>Radical Innocence (Princeton 1961)

"Her first novel, *The Heart of a Lonely Hunter* (1940), a parable on the subject of fascism, was acclaimed by critics. It is the story of a deaf-mute's associations with various people in a small southern town, among them a Negro and an adolescent girl. Her second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) was a more obscure and experimental work that puzzled many readers and critics; it deals with violence at

a peacetime army post in the South. Her third novel, *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) again attracted a wide audience with its exploration of the loneliness and isolation of a twelve-year-old girl, Frankie, who wants to go along on her brother's honeymoon. Mrs. McCullers wrote a brilliant dramatization of the novel (1950) which was later made into a movie (1952). Though her output has been small, Carson McCullers is recognized as a leading American writer. She explores her theme of the lonely individual's search for love among children and misfits in society and is able to give it universal significance."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
*The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature*
(Crowell 1962)

"In *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), McCullers's deaf-mute, John Singer, is akin to Dostoyevsky's Myshkin. He is the eye of the storm, a man deeply in love with the fat Greek, Spiros Antonapoulos, also a deaf-mute, with whom he communicates in sign language. Spiros goes mad and is put away, and from then on, Singer becomes the 'ear' for the world circling around him: Mick Kelly, Biff Bannon, Jake Blount (the 'Red'), and Dr. Copeland, a Negro medical doctor. Such a vision of life would be a remarkable achievement for a mature novelist, but it is extraordinary, for one so young (McCullers was twenty-two); for her vision was no less than a way of seeking human conciliation. As she stated, her theme was man's revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself in his own way--but this is often denied to him by a wasteful, short-sighted society.

Yet she does not indulge runaway egos or pure narcissism; she also seeks 'place,' fit, order. Black life, with Dr. Copeland as the center of a large family, is superbly wrought. Burning with a rage for Negro justice, Copeland has children who are indifferent, who get into trouble, who work as maids or fight in bars. He dreams of making his children arms of retribution for injustice, but they turn out to be obedient Negroes with all the problems of their class. McCullers's description of Copeland's attempts to deal with his rage is the finest thing in the novel: his desire for advancement, his recognition that his race is doomed by failure (including that of his own children).

McCullers persists that the individual, suspended between love and terror, must find ways to emerge. This is Biff's vision at the end, alone in the cafe: 'For in a swift radiance of illumination he saw a glimpse of human struggle and of valor. Of the endless fluid passage of humanity through endless time. And of those who labor and of those who--one word--love. His soul expanded. But for a moment only. For in him he felt a warning, a shaft of terror. Between the two worlds he was suspended.' All are thwarted. Singer represents love, but is surrounded by terror; Spiros has his madness, his fear, his desire for food, for comforting, his inability to give; Biff, his hopeless feeling for Mick, a thirteen-year-old, which passes; Copeland, his frustrated plans; Jake Blount, his rage for political justice; Mick, her entrapment as an employee for the five-and-ten.

All these incomplete or submerged people talk to Singer, who reads lips and makes them feel complete. Just speaking out calms them, and they crowd his room in the Kelly home, a boardinghouse. But when Spiros dies in the hospital, Singer, who has seemed to know all, shoots himself in the chest. One of the final scenes is the gathering at his graveside. His is a silent voice, a Jew who understands. Even Dr. Copeland, who hates whites, recognizes the specialty of Singer; a mute Singer, a bard, a maker of tones and textures, but without words, testimony to some internal experience he communicates to those around him. He calms white rage--Blount; and black rage--Copeland. He is the great conciliator.

This is middle-ground fiction, technically straightforward. But the new tones of the novel are set by the unusual nature of the characters, the intensity of their internal experiences, the silences and pauses which fill the novel, the static quality of its life, and the fact that nothing much occurs except for self-destruction. Kafka is implicit here, as is Dostoyevsky; Faulkner, of course; but the writing is fresh, novel, textured.

In McCullers's second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), the 'reflections' are as much Lawrentian and from Poe or 'Southern Gothic' as from herself; but her effort is still compelling. Although many of the literary devices were derivative--the use of Leonora's horse as metaphysical energy, the sun itself as a 'golden eye,' Private Williams's display of nudity--cumulatively they suggest a voice trying to

break free. McCullers has moved in and out of Faulkner, toward a kind of grotesquerie we would find later in Truman Capote, Paul Bowles, James Purdy, Flannery O'Connor, parts of Hawkes, even Salinger.

Of these, O'Connor and Hawkes proved best able to assimilate various styles and forge something distinctively their own. None of this is intended to discredit McCullers's achievement, except that we have tired of the mannerisms of this group of writers: the excessive drinking, the suggested or actual homosexuality, the helpless artistic sensibility (in the Filipino houseboy, Anacleto, a Tennessee Williams type), the visible adultery, and so on. But to all this--and it was relatively new when McCullers turned to it--she added qualities of stasis, silence, withdrawal, which are unique. She became successful here, and later, in depicting levels of retreat: Private Williams moves silently in forest and houses, he hovers over Leonora's bed like a statue, and he blends in with sun and moon, like a specter. His values are idiosyncratic, incapable of examination. His life is so withdrawn--he has spells that energize his actions--that it can only be expressed, not analyzed. His expression is intense voyeurism, but not distanced; he brings himself right up to the flesh, where sight becomes tactile.

Little of this aberration is weakness. Private Williams is strength itself--identified with nature's power, horses, sun, forests. Like a Lawrentian heroine, he gains strength from natural forces, whereas Leonora's husband, a weakling, locates his life in late studying, unresolved sexual feelings, inadequacy in bed, playing the cuckolded husband on an army base. Lawrence's short story 'Sun' is a prototype.

What derives from this ballet--and the novel is a dance of fading forces--is a rhythm which indicates McCullers is moving out toward new forms of expression. Not always stylistically fresh, she is rhythmically innovative, introducing broad elements of movement and silence, intense frenzy combined with withdrawal. Except for the horses, *Reflections* is, like its title, almost completely lacking in sound. Reflections from the sun create another order of being, one of stealth, voyeurism, watchfulness. In this brief novel, written when McCullers was barely past twenty, we find a sensibility that has absorbed its novelistic lessons and is using form to express something distinct. This, too, is an army novel, about an army in peacetime, with war distant; and yet the sense of some kind of war is never beyond us."

Frederick R. Karl
*American Fictions 1940-1980*
(Harper & Row 1983) 123-24

Michael Hollister (2015)