THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER

Concept Analysis


Organizational Patterns

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter was written about the late 1930s when people even a small southern town were responding to major movements in society that included the suffering of the economic depression, the rise of fascism in Europe, the rise of the Soviets, and social changes in the South. McCullers’ novel describes the loneliness and isolation people felt and shows how various people respond to the difficulties of the time. It is a novel about deep feelings and difficult experience as well and thinking through difficult issues.

In 1940 McCullers’ ideas about civil rights and African-American identity were unusual. McCullers frank treatment of atheism as a potentially legitimate point of view would have been seen as new and difficult.

The novel is divided into three parts:

Part One, (six chapters, 96 pages) explores the idea of close personal friendships through Singer and Antonapoulos. Through this relationship you begin to understand what an ideal relationship should be, however you also see how Singer overlooks and compensates for serious flaws in Antonapoulos. By the end of part one Singer has been separated from his dear friend, and each of the main characters—Mick Kelly, Biff Brannon, Dr. Copland, and Jake Blount—have been introduced in a carefully constructed web.

Part Two, (fifteen chapters, 228 pages) explores the idea of loneliness, the ability to feel something intensely but to be unable to explain it or share it with another person. Each of the characters is lonely and isolated, both in an individual and personal way in that no one connects with them, and also universally in that we understand we are all isolated that way, that it is a universal human condition. In this part, 5 chapters are devoted to Mick, 3 to Dr. Copeland, 2 to Biff, 2 to Blount, and 3 to other issues.

Part Three, (four chapters, 30 pages) quickly ends the book summing up Dr. Copland, Blount, Mick, and Biff’s reaction to Singer’s suicide and explains what their plans are now that they have lost their presumed center. McCullers described Singer as the hub of the wheel and the other characters as spokes, especially Mick, Blount, Dr. Copeland, and Biff. This part can be described as dénouement or resolution.

Suggested activity: Each chapter is headed by a numeral only. This creates an opportunity for students upon completing each chapter to return to the chapter heading and to give the chapter a name, and jot down who the chapter is about and what is happening. So for instance Chapter 2 plausibly could be called, ‘The Diner’ and the note could be, ‘Biff & Alice. Blount, Will, black
Dr., and Mick.’ Chapter 3 might be called, ‘The Boarding House,’ and the note, ‘Mick, father, Ralph, Bubber, and Mr. Singer.’ Chapter 4, ‘Mill,’ ‘Jake gets a Job / Jake’s a commy.’ This basic activity will help ascertain that students are understanding the novel and help to set difficulty level for assignments.

The narrator is a third person limited omniscient point of view, seeming closer to, and revealing more about Mick while seeming distant from, and revealing less about, Singer. You may want to consider an alternative option when discussing narrative voice with your students; McCullers explained that she developed dialects and a distinct narrative voice for each of her main characters, saying that the characters have an internal rhythm and that the narrator reflects this depending on which character is the focus.¹ ‘Character zones’ is a literary concept that helps explain shifting perspectives in this kind of narrative style, and may be helpful for students. A character zone results when the author allows the character’s dialect, accent, and knowledge limits to influence the narration and create a rich narrative style that adapts character to character according to the character’s rhythm. It may help to show students how the narration adapts to the dominant character. (Luis Gustavo Giron Echevarria suggests using Mikhail Bakhtin’s idea of ‘character zones’ to explain McCuller’s narrative style in his 1991 article.²)

**Suggested activity:** Working in small groups, students could be assigned a character, one per group. They would make a chart noting the character’s name and listing characteristics and then describing the shifts in narration that respond to the character zone. In full class discussion, students would contrast narrator style from character to character.

**Issues Related to the Study of Literature**

**Theme**

_He smile like he always do and hand over to me a dollar. A whole dollar just for them little shirts. He one really kind and pleasant white man and I wouldn’t be afraid to ask him any question. I wouldn’t even mind writing that nice white man a letter myself._ (86)

Racism. The novel takes a detailed and nuanced look at racism from the experience of both blacks and whites in an era before the civil rights movement. Dr. Copeland struggles with his family and his town on this issue, frustrated by the acquiescence of many African Americans to racism and their willingness to be “the helpful black man” instead of fighting their old south traditions.

Loneliness. Isolation is a pervasive theme throughout the novel and many characters experience frustration in their inability to connect with others. The novel suggests that many people don’t find to be understood as they would want to be, but instead remain alone as they search for the chance to be understood.

Coming of age story with accounts of initiations or rites of passage. This kind of story is also called a *bildungsroman*. Mick’s coming of age includes her struggles with growing up including rites of
passage such as getting a job, managing sexual experience, developing relationships with adult mentors, and achieving a balance between closeness and distance with her family.

Plot structures:

'It's a piece by a fellow named Mozart.'
Harry felt pretty good. He was sidestepping with his feet like a fast boxer. 'That sounds like a sort of German name.'
'I reckon so.'
'Fascist?' he asked.
'What?'
'I say is that Mozart a Fascist or a Nazi?' (112)

Fugue. Each character is complete and makes an arc through the novel. But each individual complete character's arc intertwines with and follows the others like repeated melodies follow and entwine with each other in a fugue. Fugue refers to flight and is a musical structure used by J.S. Bach and others where a melody is followed by a countering melody and both copies, opposes, and enhances the melody it follows. McCullers mentions Mozart and Beethoven, who used fugue in their music, to point to her own use of fugue in her character arcs.

Character Struggle. How to accept the isolating human condition in a world where you want human connection and you want to change people and make it a better world? For example, Dr. Copeland devotes himself to his patients and to changing the submissiveness of southern blacks even though no one in town will ever appreciate or value what he wants for them. He names his child Karl Marx as a token of his defiance and dedication to his cause, but his children never value his cause, they are taken from him, and he is alone without progress toward his goal. Clear as he may be about his ideas, no one joins him.

Tone:

But they all made her somehow sad and exited at the same time. She hummed one of the tunes, and after a while in the hot, empty house by herself she felt the tears come in her eyes. Her throat got tight and rough and she couldn't sing any more.(38)

Stark and unflinching in its representation of isolation, McCullers’s novel will seem depressing to many readers. Others will find it refreshingly honest and brave.

Tragedy: The novel speaks about loss and grief. How there are as many different ways to grieve as there are personalities. You could talk about the stages of grief. And about what we grieve about. So like in the novel—baby gets shot, Bubber copes with shooting Baby, Mick’s dad can’t financially provide for his family, Willie lossess his feet, Antonopoulos dies from illness, Singer kills himself, and Dr. Copeland is
beaten by a white mob. Consider having a school psychologist or grief counselor as a guest speaker with a question and answer after.

**Setting**

This story takes place in the Deep South, in a small Mill town outside of Atlanta in the late 1930s. This particular historical setting—the depression, politics, race relations—is fraught with questions. One of these questions in the nature of God—is he there, does he exist? Mick says that, “Everybody in the past few years knew there wasn’t any real God” (119). While Singer’s dream suggests people are worshiping other people. And then there is Portia’s Grandpa, who has dreams of God coming to turn all of the black people white.

**Names**

John Singer. Why is he called Singer if he can’t hear or speak? Singer in Hebrew tradition suggests both a story-teller role where someone in a society is able to create meaning out of apparent confusion (an artist role), but also the Hebrew cantor of singer of prayers who structures and directs worship. McCullers shows how John Singer cannot perform either of these roles, that he listens to a cacophony of stories of various individuals and even if they appreciate being listened to, disorder and isolation remain. Singer is not able to create meaning for those who speak to him, nor able to structure and direct any faith or hope.

**Affective Issues Related to the Work**

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is a potentially deeply affecting book that goes straight at very difficult issues. Careful awareness of the developmental level of the students is important for knowing how to approach these issues, how to engage with students who have found that the novel has affected them strongly, and how some parts of the novel may be too much for some students. Attention to the individual students circumstances is also important too as they explore in *Heart is a Lonely Hunter*: race relations, disability, puberty and sex, parental depression, poverty, and politics.

**Vocabulary Issues**

Much of the vocabulary will be addressed in a resource provided on novelinks. See the extensive vocabulary list for *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

**Background Knowledge**

A brief overview of what life was like in the Deep South in the 1930s would be helpful for students reading this novel. Teachers using this novel will do well to find out what 11th graders have learned in American history class about the great depression, Jim Crow laws, and how Americans viewed the rise of fascism and Hitler in the 1930s and in the seeming inevitability of war that hung over the period. It would also be useful for them to know the circumstances surrounding the US alliance with Soviet Russia in the 1930s.
Implications for Students of Diversity

This could be a valuable and central book for its perspective on racial equality and its mature treatment of the different ways to respond to racial prejudice and injustice. For example, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* shows Copeland proposing the point of view that injustice must be fiercely resisted relying on the kind help and accommodation of other African-Americans who he criticizes for not resisting and for being too accommodating. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* looks at other kinds of prejudice and injustice besides racial injustice, considering the economic strangulation of the poor and the working class, with a major theme of the issue of disability too.

Gender Issues

The novel shows a woman’s point of view of a girl’s first sexual experience. McCullers’s treatment of this is different from the usual portrayal in adolescent literature, works against cliché, and students may be curious about the perspective. For example, Mick is not very conscious of femininity, and Harry is full of guilt and lasting misgivings about their experimentation. The value of this perspective is that it is informed by the experience of a woman writer and not the extrapolation of male writers on woman’s sexual experience that are found from Hawthorne to Hemingway. The challenge of this perspective is that, although it is not sexually explicit, it is a frank portrayal of the emotional ramifications of sex. Also challenging is that McCullers offers no traditional guiding moral or ethical boundaries that teachers typically use to put this topic into context for high school students. McCullers herself was highly skeptical about romantic love and experimented with her sexual identity. For one example, McCullers dropped her feminine name Lulu at age 13, and retaining only the masculine middle name Carson.

Project Ideas

The Fugue

The fugue is a musical composition method that McCullers expressed interest in and embedded in her novel in references to music that features fugues such as Beethoven’s *Eroica* symphony and Mozart. But she also incorporates the fugue method of composition by having successive voices follow each other in repeating a theme. The fugue can create the sense of individual and isolated voices that chase each other through a theme. Musically, fugue can give the sensation of argument or dispute between
compete, contending, or chasing voices. In most musical fugues these voices are ultimately resolved in a unified chords but in the meantime, the effect of chasing flying voices that are solitary in themselves.

*Suggested activity:*

1. Chasing fugue voices in Bach’s *Toccatas and Fugue*. Listen to the introduction and point out the main theme, and ask the class to listen for this same theme to begin in a different voice. Stop the CD to point out when the second voice has begun. Then listen to the rest of the piece at full volume so the students can hear the chasing struggling individual voices carry the theme. Afterwards, discuss how this sounded to them and if they gave the different voices individual characteristics as they chased the theme.

2. Now ask the class to identify competing voices that chase each other in HLH. Suggest they think of Copeland’s sincere vital “singing” of his theme advocating resistance to racial oppression, and to think of how alone his voice is, how no one follows him, no one agrees with him, despite how urgently he “sings” his theme. Then ask the class to think of Blount’s lonely theme of resistance to economic oppression, for mill workers, for example. Discuss how his urgency is like Copeland’s, his isolation and failure to find harmony with others is like Copeland’s. Then ask them to whether Copeland and Blount are “singing” the same theme (resistance to oppression). Ask them to note the points where Copeland and Blount find themselves in harmony together despite their lonely songs.

3. Show students a mathematically visual demonstration of the chasing fugue by having them make a möbius band, as shown below. Define what a möbius band is. Ask them to draw a line along the paper continuously, and to compare how the line chases itself, to the way a musical or literary theme chases itself in a fugue. This represents the lonely chasing quality of a fugue them. Ask them to continue drawing the line so that they are re-drawing the line on top of the previous line. This represents the harmonic quality of a fugue theme, how it eventually joins with itself, voice-to-voice, line-to-line as the voices comes together.

*Möbius band*

To turn a rectangle into a Möbius strip, join the edges labeled A so that the directions of the arrows match.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M%C3%B6bius_strip

*Research activity:* Have students review the background research they did into historical contexts, and suggests ways that history repeats themes. Repeated theme of struggle against oppression: racial, economic, disability, gender. Repeated theme of economic phases of boom and bust, or boom, recession, depression. Repeated these of the rise of authoritarianism in politics and government.
Enrichment Texts

One of the benefits of teaching *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is that it features some important historical contexts. All of these are relevant to us today in varying degrees. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* presents both a challenge and an opportunity for students. There is a lot of context the students may need, or at least benefit from while reading this book. However, this presents a challenge for the teacher who feels obligated to cover all of this. A good recommendation might be to choose one or several issues to focus on and plan carefully how much informational and functional texts to introduce to students. Another recommendation might be to have students’ projects provide some of the background.

2. History of Deaf people in American. Sign language
4. HBO special, *Black Book 1 & 2*.
5. Hitler and Fascism in the 30s.
6. The Great Depression.
7. Soviet Communism and Marx.

*Suggested activity:* Students can do a research project on topics 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7. Either writing a paper, or creating a collage, or a brochure using pictures and words describing the deep south circa 1938. Collages and brochures could be displayed on classroom walls.

Helps on the internet.

Listen to *Toccata and Fugue in D minor*, by Bach, on youtube. This particular one will help students who benefit from visual learning. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipzR9bhei_o](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipzR9bhei_o)

Listen to Mick’s favorite song, Beethoven Symphony No. 3, also known as ‘Eroica.’ Part 1 & 2

Part 1 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFltqVS8d9I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFltqVS8d9I)

Part 2 [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFltqVS8d9I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFltqVS8d9I)

