



# THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER

*By Carson McCullers*

*Adapted for the stage by Rebecca Gilman*

*Directed by Doug Hughes*

*Resource Guide by Paul Fontana*

*Education Director, The Acting Company*

## *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*

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“Miss McCullers' picture of loneliness, death, accident, insanity, fear, mob violence and terror is perhaps the most desolate that has so far come from the South. “

Richard Wright, New Republic, 1940

### Synopsis

In the summer of 1938, deaf-mute **John Singer** has recently watched his roommate and closest friend **Spiros Antonapoulos** (also a deaf-mute) be placed in an insane asylum 100 miles away from the small Georgia city where they live. Distraught over this, he moves from their apartment into the Kelly's boarding house, where he meets teenager **Mick Kelly**. Intelligent and ambitious, Mick is a 13 year-old girl who dreams of becoming a classical musician. On the street, Singer, who is white, assists **Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland**, a black physician, in lighting his cigarette. Dr. Copeland is astonished by this simple act of kindness, something he has never before found in a white man.

The New York Café, the diner where Singer arranges to eat his meals, is run by recent widower **Biff Brannon**. There he meets the very drunk **Jake Blount**, a socialist who has just arrived in town. Jake passes out from drinking and Singer takes him back to the Kelly's boarding house to sleep it off.

Mick shows her homemade violin to her brother **Bill** and the Kelly's maid **Portia**, who is Dr. Copeland's daughter. Bill, a young man already working to help support the family, derides Mick for making it and, in doing so, ridicules her dreams becoming a musician. Portia explains that he doesn't intend to be mean to Mick, he just is thinking realistically, like an adult. **Harry Minowitz**, who is beginning a romance with Mick, visits. Portia's brother **Willie** arrives to pick Portia up.

When Portia visits her father, they discuss the estrangement between him and his sons. In fact, she is the only family member who will visit him. He upbraids her for wanting to have children, thereby bringing more suffering black children into the unjust world. Since Willie is waiting for Portia, Dr. Copeland asks that he come in. When he does, Dr. Copeland accuses Willie and his brothers as returning his careful upbringing of them with “blank misunderstanding and idleness and indifference.”

Throughout the play, Mick, Dr. Copeland, Biff, and Jake speak to the audience about their ideas and feelings. As each speaks, the audience realizes that they are each sharing their confidences with Singer, who each sees as understanding him or her in a special way – each envisions Singer, ironically, as the perfect listener. In turn, each of Singer's visitors- Mick, Dr. Copeland, Biff, and Jake- start to become jealous of his relationship with the others.

Jake, who has gotten a job at a carnival, begins to express his socialist theories in graffiti, and it is answered, in graffiti, by a local preacher. Jake also begins encouraging pro-union activity at a local mill. Harry expresses his anti-Nazi feelings to Mick.

When Singer visits Antonapoulos in the asylum, Antonapoulos seems to have pulled away from Singer. He treats Singer's gifts rudely and ignores him.

When Willie assaults another young black man in a bar and is sent to prison for nine months, it has an expectedly negative effect on Dr. Copeland's health and Portia's state of mind. Dr. Copeland confides in Singer that his children are estranged from him because they, like their late mother, take comfort in religion and allow the Negro race to maintain its servile state. He had expected more for them. In a fit of rage one night, years ago, Dr. Copeland hit his wife, and she moved, with their children, to her family's farm. Portia is suspicious that something bad has happened to Willie in prison.

Singer gets a new radio and gives Mick permission to play it even when he's at work. As Biff grieves his wife's death, he starts, secretly, wearing her perfume. Biff and Jake speculate on where Singer goes when he takes vacations from the town, not knowing that he is visiting his friend Antonapoulos in the asylum. Singer arranges for the patients at the asylum to watch cartoons and he and Antonapoulos sit holding hands as Act One ends.

Act Two opens with all the usual visitors in Singer's room. Afterward, romantic tension builds between Harry and Mick. Mick's father attempts to start a watch repair service to help their struggling family and gets Singer to co-sign a mortgage on their house.

Jake finally meets the graffiti-writing preacher face-to-face and later discusses with Biff his socialist views. Patrons in the New York Café accuse Jake of being a Communist. The patrons also begin to discuss who the mysterious Singer might be. Like his four friends, each townspeople has made the silent Singer into who or what they believe him to be. Eventually, Biff realizes that he recognizes Singer from when Singer and Antonapoulos used to be roommates.

Portia reveals to Dr. Copeland that Willie has been abused by the prison guards and, as a result, has had to have his feet amputated. When the doctor visits Portia at the Kelly's, it is obvious that his Tuberculosis has worsened. They speak of the injustice that has been done to Willie. Portia and her father disagree about religion and racial issues. Mick calls him "Uncle," which she has been taught is a term of respect for an older Black man, and he is offended. Later, as Dr. Copeland tries to get justice for Willie, he is beaten by the Sheriff's deputies. Portia bails him out with money from Singer.

As warmer weather approaches, Harry and Mick decide to have a picnic. Drinking beer, the tension between them overwhelms them and they have sex; the first time for both of them. Harry assumes that Mick has gotten pregnant. He plans to leave town and get a job. If she is pregnant, he will be able to send for her and take care of her. She asserts "I don't want to get married; I want to write a symphony."

Jake approaches Willie, now out of jail, about using his abuse to raise awareness of the plight of Black people. Dr. Copeland and Jake have an animated discussion about the best way to improve the lives of the oppressed. The doctor wants to march on Washington; Jake wants to raise awareness within communities. Although they both support the same cause, they end their conversation by hurling insults at one another.

Bill finds a job for Mick as a clerk at Woolworth's. Later she finds out that taking the job, and thereby helping support her family, she will have to quit school and give up her dreams of becoming a classical musician.

Singer prepares for another trip to see Antonapoulos. Arriving at the asylum, he finds out that Antonapoulos died the month before. Because Singer was not considered a relative, he was not informed. Returning home, Singer kills himself.

After Singer's death, each of the regular visitors reflects on the changes in their lives. Dr. Copeland's health has worsened. He is moving, against his will, to live on his late wife's family's farm. Jake is going to take his social revolution elsewhere. Biff gives Jake money and admits that he paid for Singer's funeral. Mick, now a very grown-up store clerk, has dinner at the Café. Biff gives her a letter Singer wrote, one of many that he wrote but never sent to Antonapoulos. As she reads, she hears Singer's assessment of the four visitors.

"I live with the people I create and it has always made my essential loneliness less keen."  
Carson McCullers, Preface to *The Square Root of Wonderful*

### **Rebecca Gilman, Playwright**

Rebecca Gilman's plays include *Spinning Into Butter*, *Boy Gets Girl*, *Blue Surge* (all of which were commissioned and originally produced by the Goodman Theatre in Chicago), *The Glory of Living*, and *The Sweetest Swing in Baseball*. The Goodman's production of *Boy Gets Girl* received a Joseph Jefferson Award for best new play and was remounted in New York at the Manhattan Theatre Club. A subsequent production at the Royal Court Theatre in London received an Olivier Nomination for best new play. *Boy Gets Girl* is included in *The Best Plays of 2000-2001* and was named the Number One play of the year by *Time* magazine for the year 2000.

*Spinning Into Butter* received its New York premiere at the Lincoln Center Theatre under the direction of Daniel Sullivan, and has subsequently been produced at regional theatres across the country. *Spinning Into Butter* received a Joseph Jefferson Award for best new play as well as the Roger L. Stevens Award from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays. It was also included in *Time* magazine's list of best new plays for 1999 and has been optioned for film by the producer Norman Twain.

*The Glory of Living* was awarded a Joseph Jefferson Award for best new play following its premiere production at Circle Theatre in Chicago. Following a production at the Royal Court, Ms. Gilman received the George Devine Award and the *Evening Standard* Award for Most Promising Playwright, the first American to receive either of those awards. *The Glory of Living* was produced in New York at MCC theatre under the direction of Philip Seymour Hoffman and starring Anna Paquin. Named one of *Time* magazine's top ten plays of 2001, *The Glory of Living* is included in *The Best Plays of 2001-2002*, and was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

*Blue Surge* was awarded the Prince Prize for Commissioning New Work. The premiere production at the Goodman was directed by Robert Falls. It was produced in New York by the Public Theatre (also under the direction of Mr. Falls) and enjoyed a successful run at the Magic Theatre in San Francisco.

*The Sweetest Swing in Baseball* was commissioned by the Royal Court Theatre in London and received its world premiere there under the direction of Ian Rickson, and starring Gillian Anderson. A finalist for the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, *The Sweetest Swing in Baseball* recently received its American premiere at the Magic Theatre.

Upcoming productions for Ms. Gilman include her stage adaptation of Carson McCullers' novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, in conjunction with New York's The Acting Company, which originally commissioned the play. *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* will be directed by Doug Hughes. And in the summer of 2005, *Dollhouse*, Ms. Gilman's adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll House*, will premiere at the Goodman Theatre under the direction of Robert Falls.

Ms. Gilman is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and an Illinois Arts Council playwriting fellowship. She received her MFA in playwriting from the University of Iowa. A native of Alabama, she now lives in Chicago.

### **Carson McCullers, novelist**

Carson McCullers was born in 1917 as Lula Carson Smith in Columbus, Georgia to middle class parents. Her mother was the granddaughter of a plantation owner and Confederate War hero. Her father, like Wilbur Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, was a watch repairman. She received a musical education and was sent to the Juilliard School of Music in New York City to study the piano – but she never attended, having lost the purse that held the tuition money. Working menial jobs, she studied creative writing at night classes at Columbia University and Washington Square College.

In 1935 she moved to North Carolina, and in 1937 she married Reeves McCullers, a soldier and struggling writer. There she wrote her first novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*. She separated from Reeves in 1940 (divorced 1941) and she moved again to New York to live with George Davis, the editor of *Harper's Bazaar*. McCullers became part of artistic society in New York, mixing with famous writers and composers. She and Reeves remarried in 1945. Reeves tried to commit suicide in 1948, and, after Carson left him in 1953, he killed himself in a Paris hotel.

The central theme of her novels is the spiritual isolation that underlies the human condition. Her characters are usually outcasts and misfits whose longings for love are never fulfilled. In addition to *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), she wrote *The Member of the Wedding* (1946; dramatization, 1950), which also focuses on a lonely adolescent girl. Her other works include the novels *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) and *Clock without Hands* (1961); a volume of stories, *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe* (1951; title story dramatized by Edward Albee in 1963); and a play, *The Square Root of Wonderful* (1958).

As a result of misdiagnosed rheumatic fever in her adolescence, McCullers suffered a series of strokes during her twenties that left her partially paralyzed; during her last years she was confined to a wheelchair. She died of the last of these strokes in 1967 in Nyack, New York. A posthumous collection of her writings, *The Mortgaged Heart*, was published in 1972.

Adapted from Wikipedia

## Themes and Ideas

*The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is a reflection on personal **isolation** within a community. Each of the five main characters feels alone in the midst of the town in which they live. Singer and Biff have had their relationships torn apart by circumstance. Dr. Copeland and Jake are alienated by their singular vision for changing the world. Mick is an individual in a world that values conformity – much like Carson McCullers felt as an adolescent. Singer is also alienated by his deafness, Copeland by race, Jake by his drinking.

The play also questions the **Value of Religion** in people's lives: Is it a distraction or a comfort? Dr. Copeland calls religion "the cult of meekness" that perpetuates the oppression of the Black race.

All of the characters deal with **Money** and its value. Class structures and economic devastation are on everyone's mind (it was the Depression after all).

The play's treatment of **Race** and the early Civil Rights movement in the South is also notable. Two characters discuss whether advancement for Blacks will be gained by small consciousness-building efforts with the cooperation of Whites or by large demonstrations of outraged Blacks.

The play's characters have **a Vision of a Better World**: a life other than the one in which they find themselves. For example, Dr. Copeland and Jake dream of large-scale social change and Mick dreams of artistic expression.

**Heroism**, in its various interpretations, is also present as a theme. Mick's courageously sacrifices her education for her family. In addition, Portia's faith, Willie's strength, Harry's "scruples," Mr. Kelly's fortitude and Singer's unconditional love can all be interpreted as heroic.

The play also focuses on the importance of **Music** and the arts and their role in teaching us about humanity.

The play deals with various definitions of **Adulthood** as we see Mick struggle with growing up.

And finally, the play is about **Identity**. Singer is seen, by each of his regular visitors, as a different person. They each make him into something he is not. They see in him a reflection of themselves (or the person they wish to be). They are unaware of who he really is and know nothing of his values or his suffering. Furthermore, the other characters are interpreted (and misinterpreted) by those on stage with them. They are perceived rather than known. The characters' unwillingness to truly know one another is the cause of the alienation at the heart of the play.

I see a green tree. And to me it is green. And you would call the tree green also. And we would agree on this. But is the color you see as green the same color I see as green? Or say we both call a color black. But how do we know that what you see as black is the same color I see as black?

Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*

## The Title

The original title Carson McCullers gave to the novel The Heart is a Lonely Hunter was The Mute. At the suggestion of Paul Brooks, the editor-in-chief at Houghton Mifflin, she re-titled it *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, a phrase taken from the poem "The Lonely Hunter" by Fiona Macleod, the female pseudonym of male 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish poet William Sharp. Here is the last stanza of the poem told from the point of view of the freed spirit of a dead man:

from "The Lonely Hunter" (1896)  
by Fiona MacLeod (William Sharp)  
*O never a green leaf whispers, where the green-gold branches swing:  
O never a song I hear now, where one was wont to sing.  
Here in the heart of Summer, sweet is life to me still,  
But my heart is a lonely hunter that hunts on a lonely hill.*

Our [American] literature is stamped with a quality of longing and unrest, and our writers have been great wanderers.

Carson McCullers, *The Mortgaged Heart*

## Glossary of Terms used in the Play

*Albania* – Republic of Albania, in southeastern Europe, is on the Adriatic Sea coast of the Balkan Peninsula. In April 1939, Italy – under Benito Mussolini – seized Albania. Germany –under Adolf Hitler – had already occupied all of Czechoslovakia and had annexed Austria. These acts of aggression were a direct prelude to World War II (1939–45). The two sides in World War II are generally known as the Allies (which included the United States, Great Britain, France and many other nations) and the Axis (which included Germany, Italy and Japan).

*Blasphemer* – a person who speaks of God (or other sacred things) in an irreverent way

*Bolshevik* – Derisive term for a Communist

*Cesspool* – A covered hole used for receiving sewage or any filthy, disgusting, or morally corrupt place.

*C.I.O.* – (Congress of Industrial Organizations) Labor union merged with the American Federation of Labor to form the AFL-CIO in 1955

*Commie* – Short for Communist, hence a derisive term for a Communist

*D.A.R.* – The Daughters of the American Revolution, a Colonial patriotic organization in the United States founded in 1890. Membership is limited to women who have one or more ancestors who aided the cause of the Revolution.

*Fascist* – A believer in a governmental system with a strong centralized authority under a dictator and stringent socioeconomic controls, often accompanied by suppression of the opposition through terror and censorship. Since the play takes place in 1938-39, the Fascists mentioned are the Nazis under the dictatorial leadership of Adolf Hitler

*Gangrene* – the process of death and decay of body tissue, often occurring in a limb, caused by insufficient blood supply and usually following injury or disease

*Harp* – slang for a Harmonica

*Ideology* – core ideas that form the underlying philosophy of a person or group.

*Karl Marx* – (1818–83) German social philosopher, the chief theorist of modern socialism and communism. Marx co-wrote the famous *Communist Manifesto* with Friedrich Engels in 1848.

*Nazi* – A member of the National Socialist German Workers' Party which was brought to power in Germany in 1933 under Adolf Hitler. The Nazi policies centered on fanatical racist nationalism.

*Nephritis* – a chronic inflammation of the kidneys.

*Red* – Derisive term for a Communist

*John D. Rockefeller* – (1839–1937) American industrialist and philanthropist, he ruled over his enormous petroleum business until 1911, when he retired with a fabulous fortune. Rockefeller had an interest in philanthropy as deep as his interest in business. The name “Rockefeller” is synonymous with excessive wealth.

*Uncle* – A slave-era nickname for older black men as in “Uncle Remus” and Uncle Tom’s Cabin

*Vagrant* – a homeless person, specifically one who is a public nuisance

*Thorstein Veblen* – (1857–1929) American economist and social critic



## Discussion Questions

### Pre-Show

1. If the students have not yet read the novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, ask them to imagine what sort of characters, themes, and settings might be in a book with that title. In a brainstorming session, write down their suggestions, asking the students to explain how each suggestion came to mind. After seeing the play, compare their list to the characters, themes, and settings that McCullers actually chose to put in the novel.
2. Bring in a copy (or two) of the novel (as well as the poster for the play, if possible). Ask the students to look at the cover of the book and identify the images, symbols and colors on the cover. What function do those images have? What do the colors mean and why were they chosen? Do these images help sell this edition? What words did the publishers choose to put on the cover? In what font is the title of the novel? What other words or phrases are on the cover? Do these words and phrases help sell this edition? Are you more likely to buy a book or magazine based on images or words? Are there images and words on the back cover?
3. Tell the students that the central character in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is a deaf-mute. Ask them to brainstorm possible negatives and positives of being deaf. What would be the hardest thing about day-to-day living? Would it be harder to be Deaf or Blind? Why?
4. Listen to the second movement (the Funeral March - *Marcia funebre* - section) of Beethoven's "Eroica" symphony (Symphony No. 3 in E flat, Op. 55), one of Beethoven's most famous works. What images does the music conjure up in the minds of the students?

In the play, Mick describes her response to hearing it. She says: *A long part of it is sad—or not sad, but like the whole world is dead and black and there's no use thinkin' back on how it was before. That part's got this horn kind of thingee play in' all silvery in the background. Then all these other horns and violins come in and it gets like a march—but a glad one. Like the greatest people in the world are runnin' around and jumpin' up and down. I can't really describe it, but it's kind of like God struttin' around. At night.* Discuss the detail in Mick's description, focusing on the correlation between the physical and the spiritual images. How does Mick's interpretation of the music compare to the students' interpretations?

5. Isolation is one of the themes of the play. Is it possible to be isolated and lonely even when surrounded by other people? What are the causes of isolation and loneliness?
6. Carson McCullers chose to set her novel in 1938-39. Assign small groups to research and present information about life at that time. Some assigned topics might include: the Depression, the Rise of Fascism, Civil Rights for Blacks, American Communism / Socialism, and Education. The American South's approach to these issues might be a good focal point for their research.
7. What makes good drama? What are the students expecting to see in a play? In addition to characters, plot, setting, and dialogue – all of which are found on the pages of a script – live performance has other elements like live actors, costumes, sets, lights, a sound design, and a director's vision (to shape it all). In addition to these elements, the audience is an essential component of the performance. What rules of etiquette might be important to seeing a show? (For some suggestions, see the Theater Etiquette list at the end of this guide.)

### **Post-Show**

1. What elements of the production surprised the students? How does this play compare to others the students have seen? Was there one moment or image that stood out?
2. Henry Stram, who portrays John Singer, studied American Sign Language (ASL). Sign language is a visual language. This means that the brain processes linguistic information through the eyes instead of ears. It also means that facial expressions and body movements play an important part in conveying information. The grammatical structure of ASL is not the same as English. Ask the students if, in watching the play, they were able to understand Singer. What moments were most clear?
3. Looking at the program, discuss the characters' names. Are they meant to be symbolic? Ironic? (i.e. Can Singer sing? Can Copeland cope? ) Remember too the names of Dr. Copeland's children: Karl Marx, Hamilton, Portia (as in *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice*?) and William.
4. Which characters did students sympathize with in the play? Why? Who did they dislike? Why? Who was the most misunderstood? Does anyone emerge as heroic? Does anyone emerge as cowardly? All of these characters are creations of the author and the playwright. How does each character work as part of the whole plot and the ideas the play presents?
5. Ask each student to list on paper five social issues mentioned in the play that have changed since 1939, and five things that have stayed the same. Ask each student to present items from the lists and discuss them. What or who changed the issues that did change? Do they foresee some of the issues that have not changed changing in the future?

### **Useful Websites**

Read novelist Richard Wright's review of McCullers' novel:

<http://www.carson-mccullers.com/html/wright.html>

Find out more about the author:

<http://www.carson-mccullers.com/>

The National Association of the Deaf:

[www.nad.org](http://www.nad.org)

American Sign Language Alphabet

<http://where.com/scott.net/asl/abc.html>

American Sign Language Dictionary

<http://commtechlab.msu.edu/sites/aslweb/index.htm>

Southern Poverty Law Center / Teaching Tolerance

[www.tolerance.org/](http://www.tolerance.org/)

[www.splcenter.org](http://www.splcenter.org)

William Sharp's poem "The Lonely Hunter"

[http://www.themediadrome.com/content/poetry/sharp\\_lonely\\_hunter.htm](http://www.themediadrome.com/content/poetry/sharp_lonely_hunter.htm)

## **Theatre Etiquette**

To make the theatre-going experience more enjoyable for everyone, a code of behavior has been established. When attending theatrical performances, remember these simple rules of conduct.

- Be on time for the performance.
- Eat and drink only in the theatre lobby.
- Turn off all cellular phones and pagers.
- Talk before and after the performance or during the intermissions only. Remember that the people near you and on stage can hear you.
- Appropriate responses to the performances, such as laughing and applauding, are appreciated.
- Act with maturity during romantic, violent, and other challenging scenes.
- Keep your feet off chairs around you.
- Read your program before or after, not during, the play.
- Personal hygiene (e.g., combing hair, applying make-up, etc.) should be attended to in the restrooms.
- Once you are seated and the play has begun, stay in your seat. If you see empty seats ahead of you, ask the usher during the intermission if you can move to them.
- Always stay until after the curtain call. After the final curtain, relax and take your time leaving.
- Open your eyes, ears, and mind to the entire theatrical experience!