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# Chasing the Unattainable: Manifestations of Desire in Selected Novels by Carson McCullers

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# Abstract

American author Carson McCullers's often non-normative fictional characters typically desire something they cannot have and thus a pattern of nonreciprocal love and desire permeate much of her work. Earlier scholarship on her fiction has focused on themes of isolation as well as the element of symbolism but also psychological approaches including Freudian and Jungian perspectives have been taken. This essay analyses desire in three selected novels by McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943), drawing on Jacques Lacan's theory of desire, which claims that the object of one's desire is ultimately unattainable. By showing that the object of desire remains largely out of reach for the characters in the selected novels, I argue that Lacan's thesis is generally applicable to them. Admitting that periods or moments of happiness or bliss are afforded some of the characters, I conclude that their typical state remains one of strong but unfulfilled desire.

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# 1. Introduction

The American author Carson McCullers (1917-1967) wrote five novels, several short stories and plays as well as essays and poetry. Recurring themes in her work are spiritual isolation and alienation, often expressed through strikingly non-normative characters: adolescent tomboys, ethnical minorities, homosexuals, social misfits, alcoholics and physically or intellectually disabled characters that sometimes border on the grotesque and are disconnected from mainstream society. What many of them have in common is a desire for someone or something that they cannot have.

Few, if any of the characters in the novels of McCullers are being desired by their objects of desire. For someone who has read *The Ballad of the Sad Café*, this does not come as a surprise. In this short novel, McCullers lets the otherwise mostly covert narrator share some thoughts on the predicament of every lover in the world, declaring that his is a very lonely pursuit: “He must house his love within himself as best he can; he must create for himself a whole new inward world — a world intense and strange, complete in himself” (417). The reflective narrator continues, “The lover craves any possible relation with the beloved, even if this experience can cause him only pain”, then asserts that in spite of the pain it entails, the role of the lover is still the more desirable one. (417). Here, it seems, is the essence of McCullers’s idea of the pain of human love and desire laid bare.

Previous scholarship on McCullers’s fiction has focused on the themes of isolation and loneliness, as well as on the importance of symbolism and allegory in her work. Attempts have been made to label McCullers as a Southern Gothic or a modernist writer and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others have contributed with feminist analyses. Furthermore, in recent years, new perspectives have been introduced, including intersectional approaches, that raise the many non-normative and queer elements of McCullers’s writing. Within the area of psychoanalytic readings, Harold Bloom has proposed that Sigmund Freud offers the key to understanding McCullers’s work (vii), and Doreen Fowler has used Jacques Lacan’s theory on identity for analysing key scenes in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*.

In order to further the research in this field, I will study how desire is treated in McCullers’s work, touching upon the influence of the unconscious as proposed by Freud as well as Carl Jung’s theory of the importance of the inner world, and in particular discussing Lacan’s theory of desire. As Dylan Evans summarises it, Lacan’s theory is based on the assumption that desire starts with a sense of fundamental lack, and that the thing we desire the most is unattainable for us (36). I will explore to what extent this seems to be true for characters in selected novels of McCullers.

Since parallels can be found between Lacan’s ideas on desire and those of the narrator in *The Ballad of the Sad Café* and the many asymmetrical, non-reciprocal patterns of desire, love

and relationships depicted in McCullers's novels, Lacan's ideas lend themselves well to analysing desire in her texts. I will argue that McCullers in her work develops a theory of love and desire that shows similarities with some of Lacan's theories, in the sense that the object of desire of McCullers's characters remains essentially elusive and unattainable for them. Moreover, also in line with Lacan's ideas, I will show how dreams and images related to the characters' desires are often projected onto other characters, the *other*. Touching upon Jung's ideas about man's inner world, I will argue that the rich and often vividly depicted inner worlds of the characters can be seen as manifestations of their desires. For my analysis I have selected characters whose desires appear particularly striking in McCullers's first three novels, namely Mr. Singer and Mick Kelly in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Private Williams and Captain Penderton in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. These three novels were all developed and written during an early creative peak and published 1940-43.

The following chapter will include a brief introduction to McCullers and to previous scholarship on her work, presenting the implications for using a psychological approach and briefly introducing Lacan's main theories related to desire. I will then dedicate the three main analysis chapters to study desire in the characters of the three selected novels, showing nonreciprocal patterns of love and desire, as well as discussing the significance of described lacks and handicaps of some of the characters. I will also show how moments of ecstasy and bliss or short periods of happiness are afforded the characters, only to be drawn back, revealing their typical state to be one of strong but unfulfilled desire.

## 2. McCullers, Lacan and Desire

Born Lula Carson Smith in Columbus, Georgia in 1917, Carson McCullers was initially destined for a career in music, but after a failed attempt at studying the piano in New York and falling ill at a young age with rheumatic fever (for decades misdiagnosed as "pneumonia with complications"), she switched to writing instead (Carr 36). At the age of 23 she published her debut novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* in 1940, combining the themes of isolation and desire with the topics of fascism and social and racial injustice. The novel drew critical acclaim and McCullers was recognised as an important new literary voice by Rose Feld in the *New York Times* (4) and lauded by African-American author Richard Wright for her capacity for embracing "white and black humanity in one sweep of apprehension and tenderness" (195). Her major work also includes the novels *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941), *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1943) and *The Member of the Wedding* (1943), a successful Broadway adaptation of the latter in 1950, and finally, to less critical acclaim, the novel *Clock without Hands* in 1961.

Throughout her life, she suffered from ill health, including several strokes that finally left her left side paralysed, as well as alcoholism. She married Reeves McCullers, an aspiring writer, while writing her debut novel *The Heart*, only to divorce him after its publication. She wrestled with sexual ambivalence, periodically living with men, but also falling in love with women, among them the Swiss writer and photographer Annemarie Schwarzenbach (McCullers, *Illumination and Night Glare* 551, Carr 101) and the writer Katherine Anne Porter (Carr 146). She remarried Reeves McCullers after he was wounded in the Second World War and they stayed married but later separated. He committed suicide in 1953 (Carr 403). While working on an autobiography, battling with serious illness and the consequences of one more stroke, Carson McCullers died in 1967.

Carson McCullers's work has been thoroughly analysed by literary critics and continues to be the subject of investigation. In the 1950-60s, identifying spiritual isolation as the main subject, Dayton Kohler and Edward Richard Barkowsky argued that what McCullers develops is a typical American theme (Kohler 5), preoccupying writers such as Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner and Truman Capote (Barkowsky 2-3). To place McCullers in this tradition is plausible, also considering McCullers's own reflection on the topic: "The themes the artist chooses are always deeply personal. I suppose that my central theme is the theme of spiritual isolation. Certainly I have always felt alone" (McCullers, Preface to *Square Root of Wonderful* 325). However, Kohler also points to the allegorical and symbolical qualities of McCullers's fiction, suggesting that she successfully manages to find a balance between the realistic and the symbolic (3). Oliver Evans, author of the first biography on McCullers, insists that her use of allegory for didactic purpose is the key to understanding her work, her mastery of the art being next to unsurpassed, but that paradoxically, her "excess of talent" for realistic detail mars the overall effect of the allegory (45).

Summing up McCullers's work in 1977, Louis D. Rubin claimed that the fundamental premise at the centre of her fiction is "that solitude — loneliness — is a human constant, and cannot possibly be alleviated for very long at a time" (5). Suggesting that the pain and loneliness of the often freakish characters, so sympathetically identified in her fiction, must spring from the necessity but inability to conform to a strict set of social rules, Rubin draws parallels to Marcel Proust, of whom McCullers was a great admirer. He points out that like McCullers's characters, the characters in Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-27) harbour "the unsatisfied desire to possess, to use, to pleasure oneself through or upon (never with) others" (10).

Revisiting McCullers's work for a critical anthology in 2009, Harold Bloom emphasised the topics of love and desire, claiming that her protagonists' most notable trait is "their tragic capacity to love impossible recipients of their erotic desires" (vii). Interestingly, Bloom finds

this trait best captured by Freud in his 1912 paper “The Dynamics of Transference”, which describes the formation in every human of a cliché or stereotype, that “perpetually repeats and reproduces itself as life goes on” (312-313). According to Freud, both the conscious and the unconscious parts of the libido play a part in the process in which any new person that enters the scene will rouse “expectant libidinal impulses” in the *subject* (313). Bloom offers thus an example of how psychological criticism can be applied to McCullers's fiction, which does not get less legitimate considering her biographer Virginia Spencer Carr's claim that McCullers herself was deeply influenced by Freud (Carr 39). In more recent research by Rachel Adams, Kristen Proehl and Alison Graham-Bertolini, the non-normative and queer aspects of McCullers's work have been highlighted and Temple Gowan has suggested a queer post-humanist reading of *Reflections*, in which a horse plays a key part. Moreover, Lisa Hoffman-Reyes has made use of Jung's ideas to analyse the revenge theme in *The Ballad* (38).

Using Freud's and Jung's ideas to analyse McCullers's work opens up the door to go further and also apply the ideas of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (1901-1981). A disciple in the Freudian school of psychoanalysis, but finding that Freud's ideas needed developing or adjusting (also discarding some of them), Lacan elaborated his own extensive opus of theories on aspects of the human psyche, including the unconscious, the subject, identity, alienation and desire. Apart from drawing on psychiatry and psychology, he approached other disciplines such as literature, philosophy, mathematics and above all linguistics, building and developing his own theories using that knowledge. Despite being infamously complex and often difficult to understand, these theories have since been applied not only within psychiatry and psychoanalysis but have also had a strong influence on literary theory.

One of Lacan's most well-known theories aims to explain how identity and alienation is formed. According to Lacan, this happens during the so-called *mirror stage*, when a baby is between six and eighteen months old and for the first time sees its reflection in a mirror. Contrasting with the baby's fragmented sense of self, the mirror presents a whole and more ideal image, with which the baby starts to identify; this is when the *ego* takes shape (Evans 118). However, this is imaginary, argues Lacan: “[the child's] joy is due to his imaginary triumph in anticipating a degree of muscular co-ordination which he has not yet actually achieved” (as quoted by Evans 118). Identification occurs with an *imaginary*, ideal ego that acts as a “promise of future wholeness which sustains the ego in anticipation”, that is, something which is not *real*. Thus, the ego is in fact a result of a misunderstanding and this is where the process of alienation inevitably and irrevocably starts (118): “The subject is fundamentally SPLIT, alienated from himself, and there is no escape from this division, no possibility of ‘wholeness ’or synthesis” (9). This is according to Lacan the

start of a life-long, unfulfillable *desire*, in its essence different from *need* and *demand*, both of which can be satisfied.

Lacan's theories presuppose that the unconscious is structured like a language. Rather than using the Freudian terms of *super-ego*, *ego* and *id*, Lacan distinguishes between the *Imaginary*, the *Symbolic* and the *Real* (Evans 84, 162, 203), different realms within which the psyche works. He also distinguishes between two different versions of the *other*: *little other* (lower-case) and *Big Other* (upper case). Whereas the concept of the *other* arises at the mirror stage, it is imaginary and just a "reflection and projection of the ego" (Evans 135), the *Other* is symbolic, on a radically different level of otherness. It represents the order of Language and Law and cannot be grasped by way of identification (136).

In his 27-session seminar *Desire and its Interpretation* (1958-1959), Lacan developed his thinking on the subject of desire departing from Spinoza's statement that "desire is the very essence of man", acknowledging Freud's contribution, then goes on to establish his own theory (*Desire and its Interpretation* 8). According to this theory, desire is always related to a lack, sometimes called "lack of being", as opposed to "lack of having", which is instead related to demand (Evans 98). The *object* is both the cause and target of desire. Having started with the idea that the initial object of desire is the ideal but imaginary ego in the mirror image (Evans 128), Lacan later developed it to encompass something that is separate from one's own body, located inside the other. Lacan names this object of desire *objet petit a*. To describe it, he at times uses the Greek term *agalma*, which signifies an offering to the gods, an object that is very precious but can be stored and hidden inside a worthless box. In this way, it is similar to the object of desire that we seek inside the other (128). As Evans summarises it,

*a* denotes the object which can never be attained, which is really the CAUSE of desire rather than that towards which desire tends [... ] *Objet petit a* is any object which sets desire in motion [...]. The drives do not seek to attain the *objet petit a*, but rather circle round it. (128)

Thus, the Lacanian object of desire is not only unattainable but may also be hidden in a "worthless box", inside the other. This is where the parallels with ideas and patterns in McCullers work start to appear more clearly, namely the existence of (impossible) love or desire for what other people might regard as worthless. I will trace these ideas across the three selected novels in the following chapters.

### 3. Lover and Beloved in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

One way to be introduced to the nature of love and desire as they are depicted in McCullers's novels is by reading the elaborations on the subject by the narrator in *The Ballad of the Sad Cafe*, referred to in the introduction. The following ideas on what can incite love are shared:

The most outlandish people can be the stimulus for love. [...] The beloved may be treacherous, greasy-headed, and given to evil habits. Yes, and the lover may see this as clearly as anyone else — but that does not affect the evolution of his love one whit. A most mediocre person can be the object of a love which is wild, extravagant, and beautiful as the poison lilies of the swamp. A good man may be the stimulus for a love both violent and debased, or a jabbering madman may bring about in the soul of someone a tender and simple idyll. Therefore, the value and quality of any love is determined solely by the lover himself. (*The Ballad* 417)

Joseph R. Millichap warns of applying this statement universally to McCullers's texts, emphasising that it is the hypothesis of the narrator and not of McCullers, thus applicable only to the characters in this particular story (331). That being a valid point indeed, I still argue that the hypothesis describes a circumstance true of a considerable number of characters in her novels, and thus could also be viewed as a more general manifesto. The idea that the value afforded the object is entirely up to the lover appears significant. Below, I will examine this aspect of desire in Carson McCullers's debut novel *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, focusing on two of the main characters, Mr. Singer and Mick Kelly.

Set in a small town in the American Deep South after the Great Depression, *The Heart* features an unusual set of main characters: a deaf-mute man hopelessly worshipping another deaf-mute man, an adolescent tomboy discovering her inner world, a well-educated African American doctor struggling for justice for his people, an alcoholic communist agitator and an observant restaurant-bar owner with unclear sexual inclinations. Narrated intermittently from these characters' different perspectives, the novel explores the unbalanced relationships between them. Already in the first sentence, "In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together", the novel's most significant relationship involving desire is introduced (3). One of the mute characters is Mr. Singer, eloquent in sign language and always eager to express everything that is on his mind to his obese and mentally handicapped friend Antonapoulos, who is likewise deaf-mute.

The relationship matches the narrator's descriptions of love in *The Ballad* quoted earlier, with Singer as the lover and Antonapoulos as the outlandish beloved. Singer will do anything for Antonapoulos in order to please him, regardless of how unreasonable his friend's

demands are. After Antonapoulos's mental health worsens and he is consequently put in a mental institution, Singer finds himself alone and with no-one to talk to. Outwardly, he resigns to this new reality and starts walking the streets of the town with "the look of peace that is seen most often in those who are very wise or very sorrowful" (171). Inwardly, however, Singer cannot find peace. He realises that he cannot bear to be without his friend, and his mind is filled with thoughts of him: "Antonapoulos! [...] At night when he closed his eyes the Greek's face was there in the darkness — round and oily, with a wise and gentle smile. In his dreams they were always together" (171). The memories of how foolish his friend has often been fade, giving way to a better and wiser version of him: "his friend seemed to grow larger in his mind, and his face looked out in a very grave and subtle way from the darkness at night" (174). Already from the start, Antonapoulos's muteness and mental handicap act to strengthen the image of something elusive and unattainable. After he is locked up in the asylum, located far away and difficult to reach, Singer's desire for him dramatically increases. Absence of the desired person allows the desirer, Singer, to create a fantasy person: Singer's idea of Antonapoulos at this time is just his own projection and not subject to the limitations of the real Antonapoulos.

Singer, in the role of the lover, creates an "inward world [...] complete in himself" (*The Ballad* 417); I argue that this inner world can be seen as a manifestation of his desire. It is a totally private world, which he does not reveal to anyone else. According to Carl Jung, "[m]an lives in two worlds", among which the "inner world is truly infinite, in no way poorer than the outer one" (264). What is revealed of Singer's inner world in the novel are primarily his constant thoughts of Antonapoulos, his excitement in anticipation of the annual visits to the asylum to see him, the composing of long, emotional and revealing but never posted letters to his friend, and the meticulous planning of his visits months beforehand, including pondering what expensive gifts to buy (*The Heart* 80). Then, Singer's brief moment of real happiness on his first visit is unmistakable: "There was so much to say that his hands could not shape the signs with speed enough. [...] The old feeling of gaiety and bliss was so quick in him again that he could not control himself" (81).

The novel never explicitly describes Singer's and Antonapoulos's relationship as physical; however, there is room for some ambiguity: "Antonapoulos kept his dark, oily eyes on his friend and did not move. His hands fumbled languidly with the crotch of his trousers" (81). McCullers keeps this aspect of the relationship suitably vague, something also found elsewhere in her fiction. The queer quality of this and other friendships depicted by McCullers has been pointed out by Kristen Proehl, who argues that many of McCullers's characters defy stereotypes of binary opposition regarding gender and sexuality (149). The main idea, I believe, is to accept that in McCullers's fictional world, the beloved can really be anyone, regardless of age and sex and in spite of any handicaps and other physical or mental obstacles that may make them an unlikely

object of desire in other people's eyes. This is something that seems to have been true for McCullers also in the real world, for example through her love for Annemarie Schwarzenbach, mentioned earlier.

Antonapoulos never talks back to Singer in sign language; he does not display any active interest in him, but as in the sentence in the above paragraph, he is often described looking back at Singer, a detail that can be seen as significant. According to Lacan, the *gaze* of the Other is one of the elements that animate desire. He even goes as far as to say that desire to see in fact constitutes a desire to be seen by the Other, a drive to be gazed back at, the subject thus becoming the object (Stanizai 14). Lacan's elaborations on the gaze have given rise to extensive use (and possibly misuse) of this term, for example in feminist film criticism regarding the male gaze (Evans 73). Here, Antonapoulos's gaze may also be seen as something more symbolic, just as his face takes on symbolic dimensions in Singer's dreams. In line with Lacan's ideas on the gaze being related to desire, Singer strongly desires to be with Antonapoulos and also, to be held in his gaze. Antonapoulos certainly does look back at him: "Antonapoulos stared at him drowsily and did not move" (81). During Singer's last visit with his friend, however, the gaze of Antonapoulos contains one more dimension, as "[t]he eyes of his friend were moist and dark, and in them he saw the little rectangled pictures of himself that he had watched a thousand times" (188). Instead of the gaze of the other, what he sees now in Antonapoulos is simply himself looking back at himself. This telling image corresponds with Lacan's idea of the mirror stage mentioned in the previous chapter; symbolising a sense of lack of being and the birth of desire, whereas the other, here Antonapoulos, is in fact just a reflection and a projection of one's own imaginary ego.

A distinctly asymmetrical pattern of desire between the main characters of the novel slowly becomes visible and is kept throughout the novel: Singer desires only Antonapoulos, letting his friend take on almost godly dimensions in his mind, while the other four main characters of the novel, believing Singer to be a wise person with unique powers, increasingly desire his company. Singer here has the role of the beloved, the object of their desire. Furthermore, similar to the ungraspable thing that Singer desires in Antonapoulos, the other four desire in Singer something that is elusive and never confirmed. Although Singer can lip-read, he is mute and only occasionally nods in answer to a question or writes a note to confirm some detail. Hence, the others, in the role of the lover, cannot grasp his core, but this fact seems to make them all the more drawn to him, another instance that illustrates Lacan's idea that the object of desire is created within the desirer and that it remains unattainable.

An exceptionally vivid image of the pattern of desire, Singer's for Antonapoulos and the four others' for Singer, is provided in the shape of a dream that Singer has:

Out of the blackness of sleep a dream formed. There were dull yellow lanterns lighting up a dark flight of stone steps. Antonapoulos knelt at the top of these steps. He was naked and he fumbled with something that he held above his head and gazed at it as though in prayer. He himself knelt halfway down the steps. He was naked and cold and he could not take his eyes from Antonapoulos and the thing he held above him. Behind him on the ground he felt the one with the mustache and the girl and the black man and the last one. They knelt naked and he felt their eyes on him. And behind them there were uncounted crowds of kneeling people in the darkness. His own hands were huge windmills and he stared fascinated at the unknown thing that Antonapoulos held. (187)

Apart from serving as a striking representation of the constellation of desires in the story, this pyramid-like image also emphasises the mythical nature of the elusive “unknown thing” which is placed in the highest position. Wayne D. Dodd interprets it as a religious offering in an “endless procession of gods”, all limited, or expressing the limitations of one god (208). In Spivak’s reading, the elevated unknown thing is undeniably a symbol of the phallus (19). This could well work also in a Lacanian reading, since Lacan uses the phallus symbol extensively in his theories, both as “the signifier of the desire of the Other” (as quoted by Evans 145), which is not sexual but symbolical (143), and “the signifier of jouissance” (as quoted 145), the latter often signifying pleasure, including sexual enjoyment (93). However, notwithstanding the ambivalence of the image, with Singer and his friends being naked and their worship being directed towards the same ultimate object, it may serve to represent unfulfillable desire in general, again highlighting the yearning for but difficulty of reaching the object of it.

Of the four characters who start to desire Singer’s company, the description of tomboyish teenager Mick Kelly’s desire stands out. Coming from a poor family, Mick loves classical music and dreams of becoming a composer. Fascinated by Singer, she follows him around in the streets, then goes to his room, telling him about the things that trouble her, imagining Singer understands her (263). Increasingly, he comes to occupy her mind: “Mister Singer. Mister Singer. She said his name over and over. She loved him better than anyone in the family, better even than George or her Dad. It was a different love. It was not like anything she had ever felt in her life before” (268). Mick’s obsession with the deaf-mute resembles Singer’s occupation with Antonapoulos. Seen from a Lacanian point of view, Mick is circling round the object of her desire, and the fact that this object is partly obscured through Singer’s muteness only increases its value. Furthermore, as a result of the gaze of Singer, who always looks at her with his benevolent smile, she feels seen and acknowledged. Mick’s desire towards Singer is clearly not sexual and I would

argue that it is connected to her dreams about making music and travelling the world. Their relationship is another example of what Proehl calls a queer friendship (150).

Mick calls her inner world where she can hear and compose music her “inside room”, as opposed to the “outside room”, which contains the school and her family: “Mister Singer was in both rooms. Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room. The songs she thought about were there. And the symphony” (139). Thus, just as Singer’s feverish inner world manifests his desire for Antonapoulos, Mick’s inner world, her inside room, manifests the things that she desires, only she channels her desire towards Singer. In addition, since it also includes such a creative activity as composing music, Mick’s inner room seems to even stronger express Jung’s idea of man’s inner world as being something boundless.

Toward the end of the novel, Singer, full of anticipation, again goes to visit Antonapoulos, his excited state on the train ride being thus described:

The great sweeps of space and the hard, elemental coloring almost blinded him. This kaleidoscopic variety of scene, this abundance of growth and color, seemed somehow connected with his friend. His thoughts were with Antonapoulos. The bliss of their reunion almost stifled him. His nose was pinched and he breathed with quick, short breaths through his slightly open mouth. [...] He surrendered himself wholly to thoughts of his friend. (278)

McCullers here lets Singer’s anticipation of reuniting with the object of his desire merge with the surrounding landscape, reaching a state close to ecstasy. Arriving at the asylum, he learns that Antonapoulos is dead. The novel then records Singer’s last hours, from the aimless rambling in the streets of the remote town to an awkward encounter with three other mute persons in a bar that only increases his feeling of isolation, the train ride home and finally the bullet that he shoots through his chest (278-280). Even in McCullers’s fictional world, where fulfilled desire is usually impossible, the story of Singer still stands out in its stark pessimism. His suicide, tragic as it is, may be read as the ultimate and logical consequence of losing his object of desire; taken further, it may imply that when there is no desire left in life, the meaning of life itself is lost.

Singer’s incomprehensible death deeply affects and has far-reaching consequences for the other four main characters, particularly for young Mick. She gets “shut out from the inside room”, which goes practically silent, and she takes up a badly paid job at Woolworths, seemingly giving up on her dreams (301). This can be read (and is often read) as a total defeat (Spivak 18), signifying the abandonment of her desires, but McCullers offers a final note of cautious optimism, when Mick is reflecting on whether it was worth it, having all those dreams:

Else what the hell good had it all been — the way she felt about music and the plans she had made in the inside room? It had to be some good if anything made sense. And it was too and it was too and it was too and it was too. It was some good. All right!  
O.K!  
Some good. (302)

Contrasting with Singer's suicide at the loss of his desired object, which is an act of nonacceptance, Mick chooses a path that may instead be seen as a betrayal of her desires. We can consider the statement of Lacan's "the only thing one can be guilty of is having given ground relative to one's desire", meant to be discussed in a psychoanalytical context (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 319). If the statement is taken literally, Mick's choice can be seen as unethical. On the other hand, unfulfilled desire should be seen as a natural part of life and thus not affecting the meaning of life. I would argue that Mick is one of few out of McCullers's characters for whom a compromise is available as an option: it is not optimal, but it does not rule out the possibility of change in the future. Mick's reassuring words to herself counterbalance her disillusionment, leaving the passage open for the reader's own interpretation.

#### 4. Forbidden Desire in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*

In McCullers's second novel, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, she treats the topic of human desire in an even more concentrated and relentless way than in her debut novel. Where *The Heart* does offer a glimpse of hope for at least some of its characters, the prospects are dimmer in the following novel. *Reflections* starts with the mentioning of a tragedy that has occurred at an army post. Two participants in this tragedy, namely Private Williams and Captain Penderton, will be the targets of my examination of desire here.

By never letting Williams and Penderton verbally disclose their desires to any other character, McCullers continues in *Reflection* to develop the earlier themes of isolation and absence of communication seen in *The Heart*, especially evident in the case of Singer's desire for Antonapoulos. The novel introduces Private Williams as a young man who has neither friends nor enemies among the other soldiers, and is never caught laughing or getting angry. His eyes have a "mute expression that is found usually in the eyes of animals" (309). His silent, animal-like quality is emphasised several times throughout the novel, at the same time exposing his otherness and suggesting a lack, the absence of some human quality.

In a key scene, Williams sees Captain Penderton's wife naked through a window. Although the "expression of his mute face" does not change after the experience, something does change, and seemingly without being able to control it, William starts to linger outside the Pendertons' house in the nights (324). Here, the significance of the unconscious for Williams's developing obsession with Mrs. Penderton is displayed, the text underlining that his actions are not premeditated: "there were in his mind no plans or thoughts of which he was aware. In him was a deep reflection of the sight he had seen that night when passing before the Captain's lighted vestibule. But he did not think actively of The Lady or of anything else" (324). His mind, often described as blank, now starts to undergo a transformation: "far down in his mind there had begun a dark, slow germination" (325), although Williams himself does not seem aware of what is happening. In a Lacanian interpretation, Mrs. Penderton becomes the trigger as well as the target of his desire. This unconscious desire leads him to inevitably break a rule as he sneaks into Mrs. Penderton's bedroom unseen one night and starts watching her while she sleeps, an activity that soon becomes a habit.

While at the same time invading someone else's private world, Williams develops a complete inward world that harbours his desire, much like Singer does in *The Heart*, with Williams's being perhaps the most private and isolated of all the inner worlds depicted in McCullers's work. He does not reflect upon his own behaviour and never puts his feelings into words as Singer does in his unsent letters. The very isolation of the soldier in the bedroom is highlighted by Mrs. Penderton not being awake to react, or even just to look back at him. Instead, Williams is completely alone in his experience. The text repeatedly tries to capture the nature of his inner world, saying that "[h]e felt, but did not think", describing Williams's mind as being "imbued with various colors of strange tones" but "without delineation, void of form" (369). The absence of thought stresses the role of the unconscious in Williams's desire and actions. He does not question them; they are unregulated by rational thought.

In spite of harbouring such a lonesome desire, Williams seems strangely fulfilled while watching Mrs. Penderton in the bedroom: "In the soldier's grave eyes there was at first an expression of intent curiosity, but as the moments passed a look of bliss awakened in his heavy face. The young soldier felt in him a keen, strange sweetness that never before in his life had he known" (343). This is reminiscent of the descriptions of bliss experienced by Singer when in the company of Antonapoulos. The difference, however, is that Williams does not seem to need or even wish the object of his desire to wake up, hold him in her gaze or, for that matter, desire him back, but seems happy and content in his isolation. Indeed, the sleeping body thus can become a blank canvas towards which his desire is projected without interference from the real Mrs. Penderton. Williams's only other moments of happiness described in the novel are likewise

moments of complete isolation, when he rests naked in the forest after riding his horse (343-344). The very lack of a need to have his desire acknowledged by Mrs. Penderton, his desired object, makes Williams stand out among McCullers's characters.

Captain Penderton is from the beginning described as sexually disinterested in his own wife, even disgusted by her (316) and also impotent (318), foreboding that his desire will take a different direction. Initially irritated with Private Williams because of an incident in the beginning of the novel, Penderton is later increasingly occupied by him. Unaware of Williams's fixation with his wife, he in his turn develops a desire for Williams, feeling "an aching way for contact between them of some sort", and anticipating the sight of him, feels "himself go dizzy" (370). Once, walking around looking for Williams and finally spotting him, Penderton feels "his throat contract" and can "hardly swallow" (370). Such manifestations of physical symptoms connected to desire are frequently found in McCullers's fiction, another example being the passage that describes Singer's train ride in *The Heart*.

Penderton gradually starts to accept his feelings for Williams: "he no longer tried to find justification for the emotion that had so taken possession of him. He thought of the soldier in terms neither of love nor hate; he was conscious only of the irresistible yearning to break down the barrier between them" (388). Alison Graham-Bertolini points out that Penderton's wish may be to break down the barrier between what is categorised as homosexual and heterosexual desire (178). However, the barrier may also signify something else, His desire for Private Williams being connected to another desire. Penderton has a picture "greatly enriched by his imagination" of the barracks full of "hungry soldiers eating and laughing together with hungry camaraderie", which makes him feel all the more lonely and bitter (*Reflections* 371). Wanting to be a part of that comradeship, he wants to break down both the personal barrier and the one of military rank.

In addition, Captain Penderton actively seeks the gaze of Williams during his walks, which stands in contrast to Williams, who does not need to be seen and acknowledged by his sleeping beloved. Penderton "always looked full into the soldier's face and slowed his footsteps" (382). Thus, in Penderton's case, the Lacanian idea of the gaze can be said to play a part in shaping the trajectory of desire, both triggering it and helping maintain it.

Through its setting at an army base, *Reflections* highlights the seemingly unsolvable conflict between giving free rein to personal desire and respecting the rules of society. There is a key episode in which Captain Penderton rides his wife's favourite horse in a moment of ecstatic freedom, after repeatedly and clearly sadistically reigning him in. When the horse ultimately takes command and starts to race at an extreme speed, the captain's simultaneous feeling of terror and rapture at the possibility of being killed is apparent:

And having given up on life, the Captain suddenly began to live. A great mad joy surged through him. This emotion, coming as unexpectedly as the plunge of the horse when he had broken away, was one that the Captain had never experienced. [...] He was conscious of the pure keen air and he felt the marvel of his own tense body, his laboring heart, and the miracle of blood, muscle, nerves, and bone. The Captain knew no terror now; he had soared to that rare level of consciousness where the mystic feels that the earth is he and that he is the earth. (354)

If the horse is seen as a symbol of Penderton's own desire, as a Freudian reading would give, this scene, being the only scene in the novel where the Captain experiences sensual fulfilment, illustrates the extreme contrast between the captain's wish to succumb to his own fervent desire, bordering to a death wish, on the one hand, and the demand for the strict discipline of military life on the other. Temple Gowan suggests that through beating up the horse after the race, Penderton attempts to re-establish the only order that makes sense to him, which entails "human over the nonhuman" as well as "normative over queer" (137). However, with the horse symbolising Penderton's desire, the beating is also a way of punishing himself for his own unacceptable desire, something that he has already made into a habit (*Reflections* 352). This opposition between unfettered desire and strict order is present throughout the novel, adding to its tension.

*Reflections* records in detail how Penderton's growing desire slowly turns into obsession, which when clashing with Williams's, finally leads up to the foreboded tragedy. Penderton kills Williams after having secretly hoped for Williams to be heading for his room, but instead having discovered him in his wife's bedroom. Whereas the catastrophe leaves the captain "slumped against the wall" looking "broken and dissipated", the soldier, who has just a moment earlier looked annoyed "as if he had been inexcusably disturbed", in death now has the look of "warm, animal comfort" (393). Paradoxically, by destroying the object of his desire, Penderton may have won a short-term victory over desire, but he will not be able to escape the catastrophic consequences of his act. Moreover, judging by Lacan's words that "desire keeps coming back, keeps returning, and situates us once again in a given track, the track of something that is specifically our business" (*The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* 319), Penderton is most likely doomed to be caught by desire again; it is inescapable.

Lacan's idea that alienation and the subsequent emergence of a person's desire is caused by a fundamental lack is well illustrated by the case of Captain Penderton. As Alison Graham-Bertolini points out, he is presented as suffering from several "basic lacks", including being a coward, a thief and a sadist (180). However, McCullers's own comment that Penderton's homosexuality here is a "symbol, of handicap and impotence" is perhaps more important ("The

Flowering Dream” 163). Thus Penderton is partly defined by a lack, just as is Private Williams, who in his primitive, animal-like way lacks some human quality and Mr. Singer (in *The Heart*), whose muteness constitutes his lack. Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon in *The Ballad* similarly suffer from lacks, discussed in the next chapter. The way many of McCullers’s characters thus suffer a handicap, belong to a sexual or ethnic minority or are social outcasts in general, foreshadows what scholars today would call intersectionality. For example, Rachel Adams observes the “multiple and intersecting forms of difference” displayed in McCullers’s characters (568). McCullers ties her characters together by exposing their bare desires and arguably does so without passing judgement.

## 5. The Love Triangle — an Unsolvable Equation in *The Ballad of the Sad Café*

A geometric pattern of unrequited desire is rendered particularly apparent in McCullers’s third novel *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. Its narrator chronicles the events of a hopeless love triangle. Like so many of McCullers’s characters, the protagonists suffer from a lack and are strikingly non-normative. The novel is set in a remote small town where nothing ever seems to happen, but in one of the windows of a mostly boarded-up building,

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. (397)

Thus, McCullers, with her skill for the symbolic, introduces the protagonist, Miss Amelia, whose eyes seem to have turned inward by sadness, years after the main events in *The Ballad* have unfolded. In the beginning, Miss Amelia is described as a manly, muscular and “powerful blunderbuss of a person, more than six feet tall” (417). Her gigantic proportions and rough manners defy all stereotypes of femininity, such as when she is described eating “with both elbows on the table, bent over the plate, her knees spread wide apart and her feet braced on the rungs of the chair” (404). Running a successful business as well as enthusiastically suing everyone whom she can possibly sue (399), she does not have compassion for others, unless they are seriously ill. In McCullers’s world, Miss Amelia’s total absence of femininity may be seen as her fundamental lack or handicap. From the description of Miss Amelia, it does not seem likely that she should attract any lovers, and even less likely that she should become one herself. But that is exactly what

happens; this is after all the novel in which McCullers lets the narrator make the hypothesis about the nature of love, and its main characters are unmistakably created in order to firmly support it.

Although the role of the lover gets occupied by all three main characters in the novel, the transformation that desire sets in motion is first described in Miss Amelia. One day, an unknown, miserable but flamboyant hunchback presented as Cousin Lymon arrives in town, sits down and cries. Instead of chasing him away, as would be expected, Miss Amelia takes him on. From this moment on, she is transformed and takes the role of the lover. Thus it happens that “a weakly little hunchback reaching only to her waist” (417), and effeminate at that, becomes the object of desire for the manly giantess Miss Amelia. Cousin Lymon, his lack highlighted by his lack of body size as well as his lack of masculinity, becomes another symbol of the seemingly insurmountable obstacle to attaining what one desires. However, by letting Miss Amelia fall in love with Cousin Lymon, McCullers also shows how love can be found in the most improbable places.

A clue to the birth of Miss Amelia’s desire can perhaps be found in the description of her observing Lymon during the night of their first encounter: “She seemed to be looking inward. There was in her expression pain, perplexity, and uncertain joy”, it “was the lonesome look of the lover” (415). It is significant that she is looking inside herself while discovering her object of desire, which brings us back to Lacan, the idea of the split self and the subject’s yearning for the other. According to Lacan, there is no limit to what can be the target of desire, but it is related to a distortion of the field of vision, a kind of blind spot, which makes the desire of the subject deform what it sees (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 89); in other words, the subject sees what it wants to see. As the narrator of *The Ballad* explains in the hypothesis of love, “the beloved is only a stimulus for all the stored up love which has lain quiet within the lover for a long time hitherto” (417). This is accentuated through Miss Amelia’s devotion to the unlikely target Cousin Lymon. As Fowler points out, a shift from the manly to a more feminine Miss Amelia happens when Lymon enters the story (262). Furthermore, illustrating the boundlessness of human desire, Miss Amelia’s love is of a maternal rather than a sexual sort: she starts carrying Lymon around on her strong back and tending to him like a mother does a child.

Fitting with the narrator’s theory of hopeless love, Cousin Lymon of course does not desire Miss Amelia back but only uses her for his own needs. Irresistible to her, Lymon uses his various charms for his aims. He can, for example, wiggle his ears, a trick that he uses when he wants to “get something special out of Miss Amelia” (438), who will do anything for him. Nevertheless, the following period is one of relative happiness and contentment, and the meeting of the two gives birth to the café referred to in the book title, a place that for some time offers the town’s lonely inhabitants a warm refuge. Thus, their seemingly unbalanced union symbolises a

sort of harmony in the story. It is when the third main character enters the stage that it becomes clear that things cannot continue that way, and that when Cousin Lymon's desire is unleashed elsewhere, the temporary equilibrium is shattered and the road towards an inevitable showdown starts.

The third character in the triangle of improbable lovers and beloveds is Marvin Macy, described as "bold, fearless and cruel" (420), a hardened criminal who has nevertheless always had a soft spot for Miss Amelia. The narrator mentions an earlier, ten-day-long, sexually unconsummated marriage between them ending in disaster as being the cause of Marvin Macy's constant resentment and desire for revenge against Miss Amelia. When he is released from prison for crimes committed and returns to town, he goes directly to the recently established café, disrupting the stability of the relationship between Miss Amelia and Cousin Lymon. Hence, the triangle is formed, constituted by Marvin Macy's desire for Miss Amelia, her desire for Cousin Lymon and Lymon's for Marvin Macy. Immediately obsessed with the handsome but evil macho man Marvin, Lymon is "possessed by an unnatural spirit" (441), which emphasises the role of the unconscious.

Lymon keeps repeating the word "penitentiary" to himself (430), and when he thinks about Marvin having been in prison, he is "miserable with longing" (441). This detail may suggest the real nature of his desire, either to liaise with criminals in general or to be among other men in prison, which Miss Amelia understands is something that she cannot provide or even compete with. In the way that Mick's desire for Singer in *The Heart* is related to her dreams of music and travel and Penderton's desire for Williams is connected to dreams of male comradeship, Cousin Lymon's desire for Marvin Macy throughout *The Ballad* appears to be related to a fantasy of prison and criminals. A Lacanian reading may thus give that this fantasy is the actual object of Lymon's desire, the *objet petit a*, located inside the other, which is Marvin.

Marvin in his turn does not pay Lymon any attention at all but only tolerates his company, while Miss Amelia tolerates Marvin's presence in order not to lose Lymon, because "it is better to take in your mortal enemy than face the terror of living alone" (448). After a period of growing tension, an outcome is finally reached through a literal wrestling match between Miss Amelia and Marvin Macy. Marvin wins it only thanks to Lymon's unanticipated intervention in the form of a twelve-foot long leap ending on Miss Amelia's shoulder (454). Hence, Miss Amelia is defeated and subsequently deserted, gives up the café while her grey eyes slowly turn more crossed every day (456), an image that takes us back to the beginning of the novel quoted earlier, closing the circle. Thus, the possibility of satisfaction in *The Ballad* is only temporary, the object of desire always remaining unattainable. Nevertheless, desire works like a mathematical formula and one cannot escape from it since it is inseparable from life.

## 6. Conclusion

In this essay I have examined the nature of the desires of selected characters in Carson McCullers's first three novels *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye* and *The Ballad of the Sad Café*. I have shown their common trait to be a desire for what they cannot have, tying the narrator's hypothesis of the impossibility of satisfaction in love in *The Ballad* to Lacan's theories of desire. Lacan's idea that the object of one's desire is inevitably unattainable can be successfully applied to characters in McCullers's fiction and the Lacanian notion of a fundamental lack being the source of human desire can be found in McCullers's characters. This lack is, however, symbolically manifested in different forms, such as in Mr. Singer's muteness, Captain Penderton's homosexuality and Cousin Lymon's handicap, constituting insurmountable obstacles. In fact, in McCullers's fictional world there are no limits to what can constitute the desired object in terms of, for example, age and sex.

The description of the inner worlds of the characters, such as Mr. Singer's, Mick's and Private Williams's, are manifestations of their desire and McCullers's text stresses the significant role of the unconscious in the birth of desire. In her attempt to highlight the non-reciprocity of human love and desire, McCullers illustrates the directions of desire with the help of geometrical formations, such as the pyramid-like dream image in *The Heart* and the triangle in *The Ballad*. In conclusion, the Lacanian idea of desire being ultimately impossible to satisfy is amply demonstrated in McCullers's work.

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