

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter

by

Carson McCullers

Book Information

Carson McCullers, The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter
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A sensitive teenage girl unravels the pervasive mystery of that loneliness which encompasses us all.

Award: NCTE Notable Children's Books in the Language Arts

Topics: Character Traits, Self Improvement; Classics, Classics (All); Popular Groupings, College Bound; Popular Groupings, Upper Grades Popular Authors/Starred Reviews; Recommended Reading, California Recommended Lit., English, 9-12; Recommended Reading, Oprah's Book Club

Main Characters

Biff Brannon a cafe proprietor
Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland a Negro physician
Jake Blount a frustrated, idealistic workingman
John Singer a deaf-mute
Mick Kelly an adolescent girl
Spiros Antonapoulos a friend of John Singer's, also a deaf-mute

Vocabulary

cogitate to ponder; meditate
desultory lacking in consistency; random
doffers workers that take the product from the machinery
dolorous full of pain or sorrow; mournful
geld to castrate
languorous characterized by stagnation

Synopsis

The story is set in a stagnant mill town in the South in the late 1930s. John Singer and Spiros Antonapoulos are deaf-mutes who room together. Singer, a gentleman and a silver engraver, dotes on the gluttonous, unresponsive Greek. When Antonapoulos is confined to a state asylum because he begins to do bizarre things in public, Singer is left alone and moves to a boarding house run by the Kelly family. He takes his meals in the New York Cafe. It is in this neighborhood that he meets four lonely people who, in turn, reveal their hearts to him: Jake Blount, an alcoholic working man who professes Marxist ideals; Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, a Negro physician who burns with hatred over the oppression of his people; Mick Kelly, a troubled adolescent tomboy; and Biff Brannon, the cafe's proprietor.

These lonely characters confide in Singer, just as he confided in Antonapoulos. Jake Blount defines his world between people who "know" and "don't know" and counts himself among the knowing, along with Singer, Jesus Christ, and Karl Marx. He takes a job as a mechanic at a carnival and witnesses the gaiety as well as the anger and violence of the fairgoers. Dr. Copeland, a selfless giver to his people, has alienated his family due to his beliefs and a once uncontrolled rage. He is suffering from tuberculosis. His son Willie is arrested and jailed. Once incarcerated, his legs are amputated because they froze while he was tied in an icehouse. Dr. Copeland's outrage has no place to be heard in Southern society. He and Jake Blount disagree on how societal change should occur. Mick awkwardly sheds her youth and foregoes her own secret music ambitions to take a job at a five-and-dime store to help her family financially. Biff slowly transforms after his wife's death. He is a watchful person and is haunted by the relationships he sees in his cafe.

When Antonapoulos dies in the asylum, Singer goes home and puts a bullet through his heart. With their confidant gone, three of the lonely hunters give up the struggle. Jake runs away to a new town, Dr. Copeland retires to Grandpapa's farm, and Mick feels stuck and cheated by her circumstances. Only Biff seems able to pick up from the despair and

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move on.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

In what way does Portia influence her father?

She is a voice of reconciliation between her father and her family. She is the only one willing to approach him at first and constantly call him out of himself and his world to share in something more. She cannot live up to his dreams for her, but in a way, she is a more fully humane person than he is. She is able to weep, laugh, sing, and dance, while he is only able to feel rage.

Literary Analysis

With what societal pressures and cultural norms was Mick struggling?

The South of the late 1930s had a rigid set of values, especially in regard to gender. By her self-injuring behavior when she listened to classical music while hiding in the bushes, we can see that she found her ambitions were somehow wrong and caused a painful struggle, and so she kept them "inside". She reluctantly gives up her boyish shorts, is left feeling empty after her sexual encounter with Harry, and feels cheated after accepting her job at Woolworth's.

Inferential Comprehension

If this book were a parable about the political and social situation of the times, whom could John Singer represent?

He might represent the U.S. government, which states that all people are equal under the law, since he treated his guests with equal hospitality. The guests (citizens) themselves, however, don't necessarily treat each other equally. Divisions are made between black and white, Greek and Jew.

Constructing Meaning

While eating a meal with Portia, Dr. Copeland tells her, "The Negro race of its own accord climbs up on the cross on every Friday." What did this image mean to him?

Dr. Copeland was not a religious man. He placed hopes for a better future in the courage of individuals standing together. But he despaired of such individuals finding a way to join hands. His image pertains to the (in his view) false solaces of both religion and drunkenness. Rather than join in purposeful action, people increased their own suffering by seeking fruitless individual relief.

Teachable Skills

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors Research the social and economic conditions in Germany after the First World War. What factors led to the rise of Fascism and Hitler? Dr. Copeland compared the fate of the Jews with that of the Negro in American society. What parallels can be found?

Comparing and Contrasting Literature is filled with examples of girls who "would rather be a boy any day" than primp all day long and do chin exercises. Choose a tomboy from another work of fiction. Compare and contrast Mick to the other tomboy. Some suggestions are Jo March in *Little Women*, Laura Ingalls in *Little House on the Prairie*, and Scout in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Responding to Literature Human communication is clearly a major focus in the novel. Four main characters turn to Singer and use his ironic capacity as a "listener" to pour out their longings and grievances. Singer himself communicates his essential thoughts and personhood to Antonapoulos, who returns no perceivable sign of comprehending him. As an essay or discussion topic, ask students to analyze this lack of reciprocity in the book's communications among characters. Does McCullers intend the condition to represent all human efforts at communication, or is she portraying special cases of some unusual interest? What is love's role in this

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process of giving and receiving messages from the heart? One detail that might focus such lines of analysis would be the central irony of Singer's name. Why is the gentle, hospitable, kindly deaf-mute in this story given the name "Singer"?

Understanding Hist./Cultural Factors McCullers deals with racial issues in this novel in a very direct way. One discussion worth having would center on how well her novel holds up historically and aesthetically. Does she do justice to the issue of race relations in the Jim Crow era? Was she more of a path breaker for the times in which she wrote, or are her themes and treatment handled more deeply or intensely by other writers--Faulkner, Wright, O'Connor, Welty, and others.