



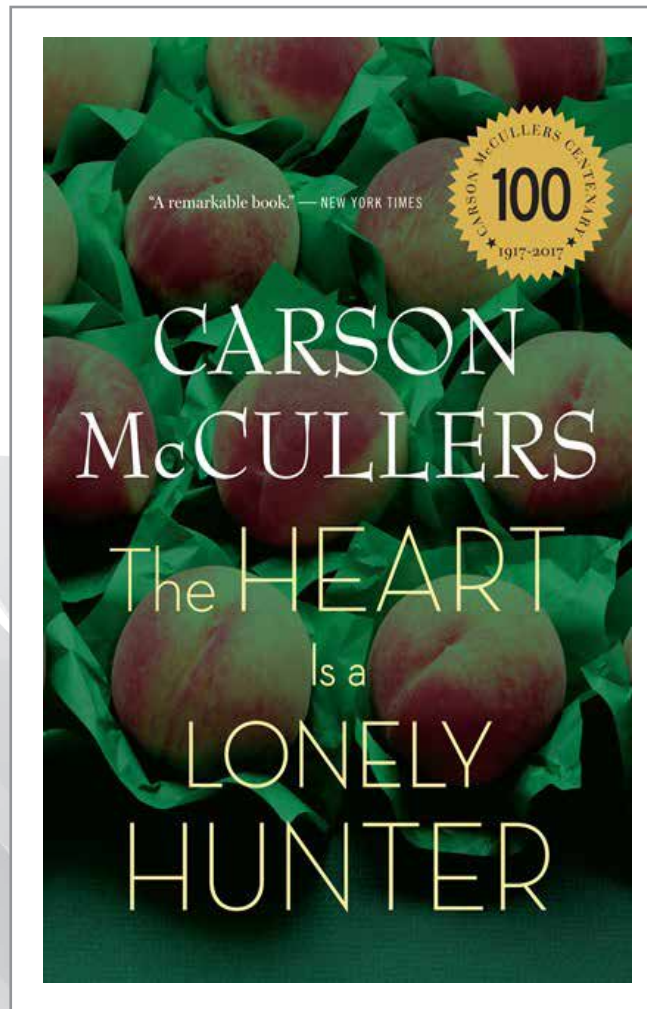
TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

Carson McCullers



READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

The Heart is a Lonely Hunter

Carson McCullers

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Summary

Divided into three parts, this novel explores the spiritual isolation of a handful of individuals in a small southern town. In Part One, we meet the central characters: Singer, a deaf mute, lives with another mute, Antonapoulos; Biff Brannon, the proprietor of the New York Café, has saved every copy of the newspaper for the past 21 years; Jake Blount, a tough-talking hard-drinking drifter, racks up an ever-higher debt at Biff's; Mick Kelly, a spirited young girl from a large, poor family smokes cigarettes and loves music and art; Dr. Benedict Copeland, a black physician who ministers to the town's overwhelmingly poor black population, is bitterly disappointed that his children Portia and William have not taken up the fight against racial oppression.

Singer, a meticulous silver engraver, has lived comfortably with his slow-witted, enormous Greek friend for many years. Their comfortable routine is shattered, however, when Antonapoulos begins to "act out"—engaging in petty shoplifting, urinating in public, bumping into people, etc.—and is eventually committed to a state insane asylum.

Singer is heartbroken, but his agitation gradually gives way to a serenity that others find strangely attractive. When Jake Blount goes berserk one day, Singer offers to take him home to the room he rents from Mick's family; Blount senses that Singer understands him, and he begins to visit Singer regularly on his time off from the new job he gets as carnival mechanic. When Mick isn't watching her younger brothers or listening to the music in her head, she strains for a glimpse of Singer, who somehow reminds her of Mozart's music. When Dr. Copeland isn't seeing patients, or tolerating visits from his daughter Portia, he finds himself drawn to Singer, whom he once consulted about a mute child patient. Even Biff comes to Singer's room for brief visits when he can afford to leave the café.

In Part Two, summer comes and troubles deepen. Mick's father, out of work, grows increasingly lonely and stressed. Mick has a big party for the kids at her new school, and the neighborhood ruffians "crash" it. That fall, the tensions of Biff's marriage end with the death of his wife. Dr. Copeland, whose son William is arrested for killing another man during an argument, becomes increasingly debilitated by TB. Mick's little brother Bubber impulsively shoots Baby, Biff's pampered niece; the little girl recovers but Bubber grows serious and withdrawn. Singer writes to his friend and sends presents, but gets no reply. When he goes to visit his friend, he finds that the Greek has been ill with nephritis, but is now quite well enough to enjoy the animated film Singer has brought. Out of curiosity, then as a matter of routine, Biff begins to use his dead wife's perfume and hair rinse. Mick continues to write songs and takes every chance she can to listen to Mr. Singer's radio.

In February, Portia brings her father the sad news that William has been crippled, his feet amputated after injury through sadistic punishment by prison guards. Then, when an ailing Dr. Copeland goes to see the judge, he is thrown into a cold cell overnight. Mick takes a long bike ride with her friend, Harry, a Jewish neighbor boy; the two share an intimate afternoon, and Harry is so stricken by remorse over the "adultery" that he runs away from home and gets a job in another town. Jake argues with Dr. Copeland about how to end the oppression of blacks; later, when Jake tries to break up a fight between blacks and whites at the carnival where he works, a black youth is killed, possibly by Jake himself, but he doesn't remember. The dead boy is a promising young man to whom Dr. Copeland had awarded a prize for his essay on the black experience.

As the family's bills pile up, Mick agrees to go to work as a Woolworth's clerk, well aware that in so doing she may be giving up her dreams, and soon is too tired and depressed to continue writing her music. Increasingly agitated, Mick wonders whether Mr. Singer ever knows the same "terrible afraidness" she undergoes. Perhaps he does; in the shocking conclusion to Part Two, Singer kills himself after learning that his dear friend Antonopoulos is dead.

In Part Three, each of the characters responds to the death of the one person they had each considered omniscient and invincible. A baffled Dr. Copeland is taken, protesting, from his home in town to live with relatives in the country who can care for him. Angry with Singer for deserting him, Jake Blount has a last meal at the café, accepts some money from Biff, and goes on the road again. Mick, her energy sapped by her work, feels angry and helpless, with Singer's radio providing the only consolation and hope. Biff takes care of the funeral arrangements and tries to solve the puzzle of Singer and all the rest. As he works to calm his own fears and make some sense of the whole thing, he catches a "glimpse of human struggle and of valor" before turning back to the day-to-day details of running the café.

About the Author

Carson McCullers was born in Georgia in 1917. She wrote her first novel, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, when she was only 23. She wrote three other novels: *The Member of the Wedding* (1946, dramatized in 1950), *Reflections in a Golden Eye* (1941) and *The Ballad of the Sad Café* (1951, dramatized 1963). Because of the brooding terror that characterizes her stories, McCullers' fiction has been likened to that of a fellow earlier Southerner, Edgar Allen Poe. She died in 1967 at age 50.

Initiating Activities

Choose one or more of the following activities to establish an appropriate mind set for the story students are about to read:

1. **Anticipation Guide:** Have students discuss their opinions of statements which tap themes they will meet in the story.
2. **Video:** View the film adaptation (1968, 124 minutes, directed by Robert Ellis Miller, starring Alan Arkin, Sondra Locke, Cicely Tyson, Stacy Keach).
3. **Prereading Discussion Questions**
 - Loneliness: What is loneliness? How is being lonely different from being alone? Can you be lonely when you are not alone? Can people be lonely at any age? What are some "cures" for loneliness? Why are some people more lonely than others?
 - Racism and Civil Rights: What sorts of prejudice was an African-American living in the South 60 years ago up against? Which problems would probably not arise now? Which ones are still common? What is assimilationism? What is ethnic identity?

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10. What gift does Jake give Singer? How do you explain the “peculiar” look in Singer’s face as he opens it? (*Singer probably realizes that the fruit comes from the market owned by Antonopoulos’ cousin.*)
11. **Prediction:** Mick has a lot of dreams. Which ones—if any—will come true? Will she make the violin? Will she have a piano?

Writing Activity

Make a list of what you would like to do/have/be ten years from now. Then write the list Mick might make.

Part One: Chapter 5, pp. 60-81

Vocabulary

hoecake 62	tremor 63	eugenic 63	subterfuges 66
conscientiously 68	exhort 68	yoke 68	submission 69
slothfulness 69	meeekness 69	meditate 70	livelihood 72
insolence 72	ambled 79	placidly 79	disdainfully 79
languidly 80	stolidly 80	inscrutable 81	

Discussion Questions

1. How is Dr. Copeland different from his daughter? How do they get along? (*He is well-educated, well-spoken, well-read, interested in Marxism, ending oppression of African Americans; Portia’s world view is more narrow—she struggles to survive and enjoys a good time; there is tension, as neither understands the other.*)
2. Why is Dr. Copeland so angry? Is his anger productive? What is the “Eugenic Parenthood for the Negro Race” to which he would exhort his people? What is the “angry poem” he knows by heart (p. 63)? (*He feels that his people need to unite to end intolerance now—not accept that their lives will improve in the hereafter; his poem is a litany against having too many children; he passes out contraceptives and counsels his patients to have fewer children, and to create new chances for the ones they have.*)
3. How can you tell that Dr. Copeland is sick? (*He coughs up blood.*)
4. What is the scam Portia describes to her father? How does Willie lose money to the scam artists? (*A well-dressed black man claiming to be a representative of the President from DC went door to door collecting “pension” money, handing out pictures of the president, promising that everyone would get \$50 a month after age 40; Willie gave \$7.50 to the scam artist.*)
5. Why doesn’t Portia like her father to use the word “Negro”? What term would she prefer? Why? (*She feels that “Negro” hurts people’s feelings and that “colored” is better.*)

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6. What plans did Dr. Copeland once have for his four children? Why didn't those plans work out? *(He wanted Hamilton to be a scientist, his son Karl Marx to be a teacher of black children, William a lawyer to fight racial injustice and Portia a doctor. His wife, however, taught them the "cult of meekness"—taking them to church, piercing Portia's ears, etc.)*
 7. What is Portia's job? Why does she tolerate such low pay? Should she? *(kitchen helper for Kelly's; she knows that they have a hard time collecting rent from their tenants—and she likes working for them, especially her contact with the children.)*
 8. Who is the "drunken white man" (p. 73) who pulled Dr. Copeland into the restaurant? How does Dr. Copeland interpret the man's actions? Is Dr. Copeland right about him? *(Jake Blount; at first he thought that someone was hurt, but then he decided that the white man was making fun of him; actually, Jake brought Dr. Copeland in for a drink, and grew angry when the others told him blacks were not allowed there [p. 18].)*
 9. How do Dr. Copeland and Mr. Singer meet? For what specific purpose does Dr. Copeland seek Mr. Singer out, with Portia's encouragement? *(Dr. Copeland has a child patient who is deaf; Portia encourages him to write a letter to Singer to find out about institutions for the deaf.)*
 10. Singer gets permission to take Antonapoulos on an outing. How does the excursion turn out? When Mick and Jake and the others ask where he has been, he pretends that he doesn't understand. Why, do you suppose? *(He and the Greek have a good time driving out to the country in a taxi, dining at the hotel until Antonapoulos refuses to leave and makes obscene gestures at those who try to make him.)*
 11. **Prediction:** Singer's last visit with Antonapoulos made Singer sad. Will there be more visits? If not, why not? If so, will Antonapoulos be more responsive in the future?

Writing Activity

Doctor Copeland thinks about writing a note to Mr. Singer, asking about information that might help his deaf patient. Pretend you are Dr. Copeland and write the letter.

Part Two

Chapters 1 and 2, pp. 82-114

Vocabulary

stenographic 88	fascist 95	wallow 98	flambeaux 98
punk 100	seersucker 102	serge 102	sedateness 104
measured 104	rites 104	resurrection 104	crepe 104
pallet 105	loupe 105	condolence 105	pallbearer 105
observant 105	cosmetologist 106	soiree 107	dirge 110
reedy 112	mincing 112	docketed 113	secondary 113
dragnet 113	checked 114		