

The Limits of Human Communication

In the original outline for *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, McCullers described the novel as “man’s revolt against his inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as possible.” Not surprisingly, the delicate balance between hearing, listening, and understanding crops up again and again in the novel. Originally titled *The Mute*, the book is populated with characters who struggle to express their feelings and, for various reasons, fail. Some characters are hampered by a physical disability, while others fail at effective communication simply because they are incapable of connecting emotionally.

In the novel’s opening scenes John Singer and Spiros Antonapoulos, both deaf, share a comfortable life together. After work each day, the men return to the home they share. Singer relates the day’s events to his friend through sign language, his hands forming “the words in a series of swift designs,” but the childish Greek has little to add to the conversation.

After Antonapoulos is committed to an asylum, Singer lives alone in a society in which he can’t fully communicate. The friendships he forms with his hearing neighbors are tenuous at best, in part because they, taking for granted that he will adjust to the hearing world, make little effort to accommodate him.

The longer Singer is away from Antonapoulos, the greater his sense of isolation. During his visits with Antonapoulos, Singer does most of the “talking,” with little interaction from his friend. Similarly, though the other characters talk constantly to Singer, he responds infrequently and reveals little of himself. Singer reads the lips of Jake Blount, Biff

Brannon, Dr. Copeland, and Mick Kelly, but feels little connection to what they are saying:

At first he had not understood the four people at all. They talked and they talked — and as the months went on they talked more and more. He became so used to their words he understood each word they said. And then after a while he knew what each one of them would say before he began, because the meaning was always the same.

Ordinary verbal communication in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* often results in failures and misunderstandings. Though Biff, Jake, Dr. Copeland, and Mick visit Singer for months, when they all happen to meet in his room halfway through the novel, they are incapable of communicating with each other, and address themselves “mainly to the mute.” Ironically, Singer responds by writing a long letter to Antonapoulos, though he knows his friend is “unable to make out the meaning of words on paper.”

Ultimately, none of the characters in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* gets through to any of the others. Human communication proves ineffective and unsatisfying. McCullers’ tender, complex portrayal of diverse characters illustrates the innate need for people to communicate. Each character yearns to share his or her inner thoughts with another person, but they fail because of the limitations they find, both in others and within themselves.