

1

Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

Examining an author's life can inform and expand the reader's understanding of a novel. Biographical criticism is the practice of analyzing a literary work through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to understand the novel more fully.

Lula Carson Smith McCullers grew up in Columbus, Georgia, a mill town hit hard by the Great Depression. Many consider Mick Kelly, the wistful young girl in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, to be the most autobiographical character she ever created. McCullers's father worked as a watch repairman while her mother nurtured her daughter's great love for music, believing wholeheartedly that Lula Carson would one day achieve fame. And, like Mick, the tomboyish author dreamed of escaping small-town life.

Discussion Activities

Listen to The Big Read Audio Guide. Students should take notes as they listen. Ask them to present the three most important points they learned from the Audio Guide. To go more in depth, you might focus on the reflections of one of the commentators.

Photocopy the Reader's Guide essays "Introduction to the Novel" (p. 3), "Carson McCullers, 1917–1967" (pp. 5–6), and "The Depression-Era South" (pp. 8–9). Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they have learned.

Writing Exercise

The novel begins, "In the town there were two mutes, and they were always together. Early every morning they would come out from the house where they lived and walk arm in arm down the street to work." Based on what the students learned from the Audio Guide, ask them to write a paragraph on why McCullers might have chosen to begin the novel with this strong portrayal of companionship.

Homework

Read Part One, Chapters 1–3 (pp. 3–53). Prepare your students to read two or three chapters per night in order to complete the book in ten lessons. The first three chapters introduce us to John Singer, Biff Brannon, and Mick Kelly.