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Lesson Three

FOCUS: Narrative and Point of View

The narrator tells the story with a specific perspective informed by his or her beliefs and experiences. Narrators can be major or minor characters, or exist outside the story altogether. The narrator weaves her or his point of view, including ignorance and bias, into telling the tale. A first-person narrator participates in the events of the novel, using “I.” A distanced narrator, often not a character, is removed from the action of the story and uses the third person (he, she, and they). The distanced narrator may be omniscient, able to read the minds of all the characters, or limited, describing only certain characters’ thoughts and feelings. Ultimately, the type of narrator determines the point of view from which the story is told.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter employs a third-person narrator who does not participate in the novel’s action, but has access to the private thoughts and actions of the characters. McCullers shifts perspective from one character to another using limited omniscient point of view. Third-person narration also allows the author to choose the distance from which we view the action as we are taken inside the mind of a character or shown only what we would see if we were a fly on the wall.

Discussion Activities

Each of the first five chapters is told from the point of view of a different character: John Singer, Biff Brannon, Mick Kelly, Jake Blount, and Dr. Copeland. Read the section “Major Characters in the Novel” from the Reader’s Guide, then discuss the ways McCullers uses the narrative lens by examining the following scenes.

In the novel’s opening lines, Singer and Antonopoulos walk “arm in arm down the street to work.” How close do students feel to the characters? Now examine the scene in Chapter 3 where Mick vandalizes the new house. “She stood in the middle of the empty room and stared at what she had done. The chalk was still in her hands and she did not feel really satisfied. She was trying to think of the name of this fellow who had written this music she heard over the radio last winter” (p. 37). Do the students feel closer to Mick than they do to Singer? If so, how does McCullers achieve this? As the novel progresses, why might it become important that we feel closer to some characters than others?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose one character that has appeared so far. Have students rewrite the first scene of the novel in first-person point of view from the perspective of this character. What equips their character to tell the story? Have them reflect on why this story might be better told from multiple perspectives.

Homework

Have students read Part One, Chapter 6 and Part Two, Chapters 1–2 (pp. 90–134). Ask them to begin thinking about what motivates the characters. What does each character want?