

4

Lesson Four

FOCUS: Characters

The central character in a work of literature is called the protagonist. The protagonist usually initiates the main action of the story and often overcomes a flaw, such as weakness or ignorance, to achieve a new understanding by the work's end. A protagonist who acts with great honor or courage may be called a hero. An antihero is a protagonist lacking these qualities. Instead of being dignified, brave, idealistic, or purposeful, the antihero may be cowardly, self-interested, or weak. The protagonist's journey is enriched by encounters with characters who hold differing beliefs. One such character type, a foil, has traits that contrast with the protagonist's and highlight important features of the main character's personality. The most important foil, the antagonist, opposes the protagonist, barring or complicating his or her success.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter defies the conventions of literary fiction. The novel does not follow a straightforward, linear plot, nor does it focus most closely on the actions of a single individual. The novel examines the lives of five main characters and their struggle against isolation and despair. McCullers's empathetic portrayal of the various personalities highlights their differences as well as the common adventure of the human experience.

McCullers intentionally crafted a composite cast of characters whose stories converge rather than focusing on a single protagonist. Literary scholars debate which character, John Singer or Mick Kelly, is the true "protagonist" of *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. McCullers compared Singer's character to the hub of a wheel; most of the action of the novel revolves around him. Yet, Mick Kelly's journey toward adulthood gives the story its trajectory.

Discussion Activities

Photocopy and distribute Handout Two. Discuss the ways *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* is a "Southern Gothic" novel. How important is setting in the novel? Which characters are "grotesques" and what, if any, unpleasant aspects of society do they represent? Do they meet McCullers's goal of creating grotesque characters whose physical incapacity symbolizes a spiritual void?

Writing Exercise

Ask students to choose a character who serves as antagonist to either John Singer or Mick Kelly and write a brief essay. How is this person important to the story? Does the antagonist make the main character appear stronger, or more flawed? How might this be important as the novel progresses?

Homework

Have students read Part Two, Chapters 3–5 (pp. 135–181). Ask them to pay close attention to the passage in Chapter 5 when Mick goes to her "inside room," and to consider what we learn about her character during that scene.