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Hopeless Resistance: The Self-Look in McCullers's *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*

When reading *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* through Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of the look, one can see how the main characters respond to their existential fate by retaliating; in order to avoid objectification at the hands of others, they objectify themselves in an effort to determine their own existence in the world. A reader best identifies this effort of resistance, the self-look, by the characters' relationship with Singer who functions as a mirror, permitting them to view, and thus define, themselves. The journey ends tragically, however, when the mirror shatters, leaving the characters with the hopelessness they have feared all along and forcing them to cope with their existential fate. Thus, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* represents a process of resistance to our tragic human existential dilemma, in which the characters challenge the look by attempting, and failing, to determine their own visible identity in the world.

The look is a concept that Sartre outlines in *Being and Nothingness*. According to Sartre, every person consists of several "versions," for lack of a better word, of his or her Self. The primary "versions" resulting from the look are the being-as-subject and the being-as-object. When gazing upon someone else, the Other, one engages his being-as-subject and forces it on the Other's being-as-object. The one acting/looking constitutes the subject, and his freedom to gaze affects the object of the gaze by determining his being-as-object (also known as his being-for-others), which is static. The subject reduces all the object's possibilities of being (i.e., his fluidity and complexity) into one static form. The subject, then, threatens the object's freedom by objectifying him. The Other can still maintain his freedom by turning the look on the prior subject, returning to his being-as-subject and reducing the once-subject to a being-as-object, a being-for-others. The roles can equally be reversed, returning the now-object to a static form that escapes himself (i.e., which he cannot see and which is not him but a faded, diluted version of him). The new subject threatens his possibilities and his freedom, further objectifying him.

Sartre explains our relationship with others through the look quite matter-of-factly, expressing that this is our existence, and it cannot be avoided. He does not offer any means of escape, because escape is not an option, but he does explain how we cope with our existence. By exerting our freedom as subject on the Other, we cope with the probability that the other objectifies us. We recognize that the Other has freedom over us but that we have equal freedom over him or her. Coping, in this sense, is akin to resignation.

In *Hunter*, characters suffer ceaselessly the objectification and misinterpretation of the Other, where the Other refers to society at large, groups within society (e.g., genders, ages, or classes), or another individual character. McCullers' criticism has likewise identified the importance of the

subjective vision that objectifies the Other. In 1940, Richard Wright noted that “the value of such writing lies not so much in what is said as in the angle of vision from which life is seen” (18). This angle of vision can equally be applied to how each of the main characters views life and his or her existence within it, as it was astutely applied by Wright to McCullers’s compassionate angle of view. Dayton Kohler goes further to identify the distinction between the inner world and the outer world through the use of duality in McCullers’s novel (2–3). The inner world versus the outer world is a concept addressed frequently by *Hunter* criticism because of Mick’s description of her inside room versus her outside room:

With her it was like there was two places—the inside room and the outside room. School and the family and the things that happened every day were in the outside room. Mister Singer was in both rooms. Foreign countries and plans and music were in the inside room. [. . .] The inside room was a very private place. She could be in the middle of a house full of people and still feel like she was locked up by herself. (McCullers 163)

This notion of an inside existence opposite an outside existence reflects the dichotomy of the being-for-others (the exterior Self made visible by the look) and the inner Self from which the being-for-others escapes. Ihab Hassan furthers reflects the duality identified by Kohler in writing that “each person remains in a padded cubicle” (315).

The distinction between their outer existence (their being-for-others) and their inner existence equally victimizes the remaining characters. Singer exists uniquely to each individual of the town, depending on his or her specific projections. Simultaneously, Singer is a Jew, a “very rich man,” “an organizer for the C.I.O.,” “Turkish,” and several others (McCullers 200). Dr. Copeland is likewise separated from himself by the being-for-others assigned to him. To the majority of the white race, Dr. Copeland is “Uncle,” a black man ready to jump to the command of “do that” (84). Blount is an ignorant “Red Bolshevik,” who does not merit the other two operators’ real attention, and Mick is convinced that Biff “always had this grudge against her” when he really loves her more than anyone else (283, 172). Singer even sees Antonapoulos illusorily as he remembers “only the wise and good” over what really is “wrong and foolish” (204). Every character suffers from having a visible identity separate from their true, inner being. This is the threat of the look.

For Sartre, we cope with our threatened, limited existence by exerting our freedom as subject on the Other. Coping, once again, resembles resigning to being limited by the Other through knowing that we alternatively limit him or her. For the main characters of *Hunter*, this is simply not enough. The look, as the explanation of the characters’ alienation, and the coping recommendation are limited for four primary reasons: 1) the look does not grant the characters any control over how they are seen or understood; 2) because of this lack of control, the characters retaliate against the resignation of the look to assert control; 3) the look is limited to one person viewing another but does not allow for viewing of the self; and 4) because they choose to retaliate (hence, to control their being-for-others) by viewing the self, their struggle becomes an internal one, fighting themselves more than the Other. Thus, the main characters—Mick, Dr. Copeland, Blount, Singer, and Biff—carry out a process that can be identified as a response to the fatality of Sartre’s existentialism in an effort to free themselves from the objectification they suffer by dint of the Other. This attempted freedom manifests itself as a perversion of the look (the self-look), for it details the transmutation of the look at the Other to a look at the Self.

According to *Being and Nothingness*, the look reduces a human to a single, static being—one that is limited to the subject’s (the viewer’s) perception. This static being, known by Sartre as

the being-for-others, is just that—for others. The Other has the freedom to determine my being-for-others, which is my visible identity in the world. According to Sartre, nothing can be done to prevent this objectification at the hands of the Other. Subject determines object; he has power over how another is seen. The characters of *Hunter* challenge Sartre's claim; if the subject determines the being-for-others, then would one not be able to control his being-for-others if he acts as subject? In theory, one's freedom could be used to determine how he exists for others, finally linking his inner existence and his outer existence. Sartre himself warns against the self-look in *Being and Nothingness*, affirming that we cannot see the Other as other-as-object and other-as-subject simultaneously, just as we cannot be a being-as-subject and a being-as-object simultaneously (276). Much like looking out a window, one cannot see simultaneously the landscape and the windowpane; only one is in focus. Within the look, one is either subject or object—never both.

The self-look becomes visible in the characters' relationships with Singer (and likewise in Singer's relationship with Antonopoulos). Throughout *Hunter*, the main characters gravitate toward Singer, and their dependence on him grows stronger until his suicide (just as Singer's relationship with Antonopoulos grows more vital until the latter's death). Singer, as Kohler points out, "is the embodiment of that sense of isolation, of separation from the community, which makes their lives wretched" (3). They notice that he represents their internal anguish, and for this reason, he becomes first a curiosity and then a potential commiserator. What they fail to see, however, is that Singer and Antonopoulos function as mirrors; for example, as Mick interacts with her mirror, she really strives to see herself.

In conversation, "Singer was always the same to everyone," yet they always seem to see in him what they want to see, what is really in themselves (*Hunter* 92). Oliver Evans discerns that "the image of him which they fashion is really a projection of their own desires" ("The Tongue and the Heart," para. 6). Alice Hamilton also identifies the projection of what she calls "dreams" onto the created god so that he becomes what the dreamer wishes him to be (215). Dr. Copeland sees in Singer "the knowledge of one who belongs to a race that is oppressed," projecting his own worldview and purpose onto Singer (135). Blount convinces himself that Singer "know[s]" whatever it is that Blount so desperately knows within himself (152). Their differing perceptions of Singer come to a head when they, for the first time, have a conversation with each other:

'Mr. Singer is a Jew.'

'No, you're wrong there.'

'But I am positive that he is. The name, Singer. I recognized his race the first time I saw him. From his eyes. Besides, he told me so.'

'Why, he couldn't have,' Jake insisted. 'He's pure Anglo-Saxon if I ever saw it. Irish and Anglo-Saxon.' (300)

Dr. Copeland, Blount, and the remaining characters by dint of projection see themselves through Singer, and their determination to disprove other estimations reveals a defensive reaction, as if they themselves were confronted. This narcissism, an attempt to see themselves through Singer, is an inevitable outcome of the self-look that fails them, but they do not see this failure until their metaphorical mirrors shatter.

Singer's death, naturally, astounds the characters, waking them from their illusion of existential release. As if their mirror had shattered, his death destroys their facility for the self-look, forcing them to finally realize the futility of their attempt to design their being-for-others. Margaret McDowell confirms that "Singer's death baffles the characters more than did his life," just as we do

not contemplate the mirror; we simply look beyond it, until it breaks (41). Dr. Copeland and Blount respond selfishly, as if personally abandoned: “[Dr. Copeland] had [. . .] trusted him. And the mystery of his suicide had left him [. . .] without support,” and “[Blount] had given Singer everything and then the man had killed himself. So he was left out on a limb” (McCullers 333, 345). Mick and Biff, unsatisfied with not understanding, are left in anguish to make sense of the chaos he left within them. Mick determines to make sense of his suicide for herself, and she has to force the idea that “some good” came out of her inside room, where Singer was housed (354). Biff, unable to rest with “the puzzle of Singer” in his mind, feels “uneasy and in some unknown way afraid” of what the answer might bring (358). Singer leaves each of the main characters behind with resentment or torment, revealing their unsuccessful attempts to communicate through a self-determined being-for-others.

While Singer’s death reveals to the characters the failure of their attempts to break free of their existential objectification, this failure can be attributed to two major elements, which existentialism itself warns against: the inner identity of the Self cannot be displayed in a visible, static form, because identity itself is fluid and incomprehensible; and while engaged in a look, one is unable to perceive the world. Sarah Gleeson-White, in her monograph *Strange Bodies: Gender and Identity in the Novels of Carson McCullers*, explains how the body and any visible, performative action (especially gender roles) masks the inner Self. Our Self exists “beyond stagnant self-identity,” and this fluidity coupled with “the way in which reflection is distorted” results in the inevitable misrepresentation of the Self through the being-for-others (56).

According to Sartre, a second reason could be used to explain the failure of the self-look: “we cannot, I said then, perceive and imagine simultaneously; it must be either one or the other [;. . .] we cannot perceive the world and at the same time apprehend a look fastened upon us; it must be either one or the other” (258). When the characters attempt the self-look, in which they engage in a look within themselves, they are unable to “perceive” those around them. Jennifer Murray identifies the characters’ “unawareness of the synchronicity of other happenings in the town,” which she further attributes to their alienation (120). McDowell further endorses this claim, confirming that Dr. Copeland and Blount remain alienated because they are “fanatical in their one-sided vision,” which rebounds on their respective viewpoints (34). The blindness of each character, while engaged in the self-look, is best reflected when they all enter Singer’s bedroom on the same night. Instead of communicating with each other, “[e]ach person addressed his words mainly to the mute. Their thoughts seemed to converge in him as the spokes of a wheel lead to the center hub” (McCullers 211). They are locked in their self-involved gaze, and when Singer ultimately dies, they no longer can view themselves. His suicide simultaneously kills any possibility of the self-look, revealing to them the hopelessness that the reader knew all along.

What then are we to make of the ending if the characters are fated to alienation? If they retaliate against their existential isolation, and even that attempt fails, how then do we account for the slight glimmer of hope many critics and readers find in the novel’s conclusion? Portia and Mick are most often employed to explain the hint of hope; McDowell claims that “McCullers’ involvement with Portia and Mick modulates the pessimism of the concluding sequences of the book to a qualified optimism as these women reach out with some hope to the future” (32). Murray likewise finds these characters somewhat hopeful, and she elaborates on the evidence of optimism by suggesting that “McCullers employs several devices which work against the sense of loneliness and which lend a tenuous sense of unity, an echoing of sensibility, to the discrete voices of the characters” (117). The sense of community, visible in the desires of the characters to love and understand one another, reveals the hopeful facet of humanity.

Contrary to McDowell and Murray's optimistic findings, one must wonder at what cost Portia and Mick find hope. And where in the text does community serve anyone? The novel's ending, instead of revealing the hopefulness and positivity of humanity, exposes further coping mechanisms: Mick, Portia, and Biff at the end cope through an illusion; Dr. Copeland copes through resignation; and Blount copes through continued resistance. Each character, shaken by Singer's death and their failed resistance, is forced to cope with their realized alienation in another manner.

Mick, Portia, and Biff choose to ignore reality in order to survive. Portia is victimized by a racist and impoverished South, where her brother is tortured in prison—resulting in the amputation of his feet—and where she is rarely paid fully for her day's work. Mick is forced to quit school and work all day in a five-and-dime store to help support her family and is also required to adopt an uncomfortable, conforming gender role. They choose self-deception to ignore the harshness of reality. Though McDowell found optimism in these two characters, she nonetheless admits that Portia's love, optimism, or hope "obscures the evil in the social order" (34). Though the ending for Portia and Mick may seem like hope, their slightly positive outlooks must be viewed critically, as we see how they arrive at this optimism and at what cost.

Biff self-deceives in another manner. Throughout the novel, Biff acts primarily as observer, the one looking. Unlike the remaining characters, who turn to the self-look to retaliate against the existential objectification, Biff copes as Sartre would have him; he employs his position as *being-looking*, subject, to exert his freedom over others. Dr. Copeland and Blount cope with the failed self-look by resignation or by continuing resistance, respectively. The former resigns himself to his alienation and hopelessness. He goes to live at his father-in-law's farm, and having realized that he has failed in life, he stops fighting. Blount, quite unlike Dr. Copeland, copes through continued resistance. He is the only character who refuses to accept his alienation.

The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter reflects every person's struggle against existential realization, retaliation, and ultimately resignation, a struggle obscured by an ever-necessary coping mechanism that often, as the text reveals, takes the form of illusion. The main characters—Mick, Dr. Copeland, Blount, Biff, and Singer himself—symbolize this mental journey of the tragic existential human dilemma, which starts hopefully but crumbles tragically into disenchanting sentience. Through the self-look, the characters attempt to navigate the hopelessness of existentialism, but Singer's death forces them into awareness that an existential fate cannot be transcended. Carson McCullers's pivotal text reveals that we can try to control how we are seen, but, as Sartre prophesies, we cannot determine our existence in the world. Many critics argue against the pessimistic reading of the novel, clinging to the hopeful hints of possibility of Mick and Portia, but these interpretations are the very self-deceptions that mask our isolated existence. As Oliver Evans astutely identifies in "The Case of Carson McCullers," her work is often uncomfortable to read, which means it's probably true. *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* realistically portrays the timeless and equally essential human struggle between inevitable isolation and an instinctual compulsion to transcend our alienated state. As the characters tragically fail to achieve transcendence, they instruct us that we can try to elude our objectification at the hands of the Other by objectifying ourselves, but in doing so, we only battle the inexorable.

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