

DIALECT VARIATION IN *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER* AND *THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING*

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Carson McCullers was a master in the use of dialect to establish character and setting and to reinforce the key ideas of her fiction. Her ability to use variations in dialect to strengthen her fiction is nowhere more obvious than in her two best novels, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940) and *The Member of the Wedding* (1946). Her prose gives us, certainly, a sense of place, time and character. McCullers made the language of both the narrative and the dialogue of these novels an important aspect of each book's identity and meaning.

In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, communication, or more often, the lack of it, emerges as a central focus of the novel; appropriately, the ways in which the characters and the narrative voices communicate become especially important in this book. In an outline to her editors, McCullers describes the structure of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* by means of an analogy with music:

It is the actual style in which the book is written that the work's affinity to contrapuntal music is seen most clearly. There are five distinct styles of writing —one for each of the main characters who is treated subjectively and an objective legendary style for the mute. The object in each of these methods of writing is to come as close as possible to the inner psychic rhythms of the character from whose point of view it is written¹.

The four characters are Briff Brannon, Jake Blount, Dr. Benedict Mady Copeland, and Mick Kelly. The mute, John Singer, becomes, as McCullers says elsewhere, like the hub of a wheel around which the other characters and their stories re-

¹ Carson McCullers, «Outline of 'The Mute'», in *The Mortgaged Heart*, ed. Margarita G. Smith (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), p. 148.

volve². For each of these five characters, she develops not only a distinct dialect in direct dialogue, but also a distinct narrative voice to control specific sections of the novel.

In his essay «Discourse in the Novel», Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin discusses multiple voices such as McCullers used extensively in this novel. Using a musical analogy very similar to McCullers, Bakhtin points out that in its emphasis on multiple characters, the novel linguistically reflects the situation in the real world:

The novel can be defined as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even a diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized ... Internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence is the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre. The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of the world of objects and ideas depicted and expressed by it, by means of the social diversity of speech types... and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions³.

Whereas McCullers speaks of contrapuntal voices in the narrative, Bakhtin speaks of «character zones» —areas where a character's language influences narrative language and the authorial voice⁴.

The concept of a character zone is different from that of a first-person narration. The idea of a character zone implies that the author, the narrator, and the character's language are influencing the narrative in that zone. The character's perspective and language will color the narrative; however, the character is not the narrator, and his language is usually different from that of the narrator. As a rule, the language of the narrative voice in a zone influenced by a character in a novel exhibits fewer non-standard language traits than the language of the character himself. In any character zone the author is likely to be using hints of a character's language and viewpoint to suggest what McCullers calls «inner psychic rhythms» of the character, not his conscious thoughts or speech.

When looking at *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, «character zones» is an important concept, for each chapter is a distinct character zone, and the existence of zones and barriers —linguistic and social— is central to the book.

The novel has three main parts, each of which contains several chapters. The first of these main sections begins in the zone of Singer, the mute around whose life the other characters seem to revolve. It then moves through the perspectives of Biff Brannon, Mick Kelley, Jake Blount, and Dr. Copeland. The last chapter in Part I is unique in the book. Although it is primarily a Singer chapter, it briefly moves through the four other character zones as the narration discusses the fact that all four of the other characters have become regular visitors to the mute's room⁵. The second of the novel's main divisions has fifteen chapters, each a

² Ibid., p. 143.

³ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, «Discourse in the Novel», in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 262-63.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 316-20.

⁵ Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), pp. 86-87. Subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text).

character zone dominated by one of the five central characters. Mick Kelley dominates this section, with five chapters centering around her world. Again the last chapter of the section is a Singer chapter, this one ending with his suicide. The final section, Part III, contains only four chapters, providing the response of each of the other characters to Singer's death.

McCullers makes her reader aware of the shifts to new narrative zones not only by chapter breaks, but also by internal signals. In most of the chapters she mentions in the first sentence or two the names of the character influencing that zone; for example, «On a black, sultry night in early summer Biff Brannon stood behind the cash register of the New York Café (p. 15) or «At eight o'clock Doctor Copeland sat at his desk...» (p. 161). One type of exception occurs in chapters where the clue to the shift in character zone is the pronoun «she», an obvious reference to Mick, the only female of the central characters. For example, McCullers begins one chapter by saying «She never had a nickel to herself any more» (p. 209). In Part II, chapter 12, McCullers uses still another way of indicating which character's «voice» is influencing the narrative. When the reader sees the sentence «Now that the days were hot again the Sunny Dixie Show was always crowded» (p. 245), he knows that Jake Blount, who works at the carnival, will be the central figure in the chapter. The only chapters that lack identifying markers such as these in the first sentence or two are those chapters narrated from the perspective of the deaf-mute, John Singer.

There are few examples in the novel of direct linguistic acts by the Salinger character. He never speaks, not because he cannot, but because he cannot hear his own voice and is afraid that the sounds he makes are strange and awkward. His only direct discourse occurs through the notes he writes and in the long letter that he writes but never mails to Antonapoulos.

His writing is formal and correct, his only variation from standard English being his use of «clear» for «clearly» (p. 189) and «like» for «as if» (p. 191) in the letter to Antonapoulos. The only other exceptions come in the letter, where at one point he tries to describe the four «voices» he is perceiving as the others visit him in his room:

Yah Freedom and pirates. Yah capital and Democrats, says the ugly one with the moustache. Then he contradicts himself and says, Freedom is the greatest of all ideals. I just got to get a chance to write this music in me and be a musician. I got to have a chance says the girl. We are not allowed to serve, says the black Doctor. That is the Godlike need for my people. Aha, says the owner of the New York Cafe. He is the thoughtful one (p. 190).

This short paragraph reflects three layers of linguistic identity: the languages of four characters in the novel (Blount, Mick, Dr. Copeland, and Biff) are rendered through the language of another character in the novel, Singer, whose language is rendered by Carson McCullers.

Owing to Singer's linguistic limitations, his chapters lack dialogue and are primarily narrative, influenced by his perspective, but narrated by a separate voice.

The main character whose speech is always consistent with Standard English is Doctor Benedict Mady Copeland, the black physician. The dialects of Dr. Copeland and Narrator/Dr. Copeland are the most congruent of any of the character-narrator pairs in the novel. It is one of the central ironies of the novel that this man who has read so widely, has such grand dreams, and possesses such a command of formal language, can be isolated from society as a whole and, more importantly, from his own people and family. He uses flawless standard English even with his children, who speak the dialect of the uneducated Southerner in a small town in Georgia, thus symbolizing his refusal to bend to the injustices he and the other members of his race suffer. He demands such a rapid, radical change from the blacks around him that they become estranged from him. As Richard M. Cook points out, «pursuing his ‘strong, true purpose’..., he has lost touch with his own cultural heritage and with the hearts of his own people. He thinks in the white man’s terms and reasons with a cold logic that offends those he loves»⁶.

In an important scene, Copeland’s daughter, Portia, reacts to her father’s use of the word «Negro»: «You all the time using the word —Negro», said Portia, «And that word haves a way of hurting people’s feelings. Even plain old nigger is better than that word. But polite peoples —no matter what shade they is— always says coloured». For Portia, «Negro» is a word that sounds distant and cold. It is tied in with the relationship her father has had with his children throughout their lives —one of severity and formality. She rejects the language along with the ideas and attitudes she does not understand:

Hamilton or Buddy or Willie or me —none of us ever cares to talk like you. Us talk like our own Mama and her peoples before them. You think out everything in your brain. While us Father talk from something in our hearts that has been there for a long time (pp. 72-3).

In her outline of the novel, McCullers describes Dr. Copeland as presenting «the bitter spectacle of the educated Negro in the South»⁷. He has watched helplessly how even his own children have rejected his harsh upbringing, his grand ideas, and his perfect English —only to treat him like a slightly crazy old man who must be taken care of (Portia’s response) or a frightening father figure who is to be avoided whenever possible (the response of his sons). Dr. Copeland’s perfect English is a sign of his education and sophistication, but it also clearly identifies him as an outsider —someone who remains out of touch with his immediate world and is regarded with suspicion by those around him.

The fact that suspicion of people like Dr. Copeland is a general American trait has been noted by several critics. In discussing Miss Julia Mortimer, a character in Eudora Welty’s novel *Losing Battles*, Cleanth Brooks says, «The suspicion in which any teacher is held by the generality of the folk —particularly their sus-

⁶ Richard M. Cook, *Carson McCullers*, ed. Lina Mainiero (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1975), p. 25.

⁷ Carson McCullers, «Outline of ‘The Mute’», *op. cit.*, p. 133.

picion of the person who means to teach them how to read and write and spell—is not ... merely Southern. I'm inclined to say that it is All American»⁸. In another discussion relevant to Dr. Copeland's situation, Crawford Feagin speaks of «covert norms» —unspoken rules that govern speech habits in opposition to the «community norms» that support the use of standard English. This critic points out that to speak «ungrammatically» can be a signal of intimacy or masculinity. Speaking «grammatically» at certain times can be the sign of a sissy or an outsider»⁹. The determined resistance that Dr. Copeland's children show toward him and toward his efforts to change them reflects the suspicion and resentment that Brooks and Feagin see as a typically American reaction toward a person like Dr. Copeland.

The character who most represents everything from which Dr. Copeland remains estranged is his daughter, Portia. Of all of McCullers's characters, Portia exhibits the greatest number and variety of non-standard constructions and expressions in her speech. McCullers obviously intended Portia's language to contrast with the cold, formal correctness of Dr. Copeland's. Margaret B. McDowell has pointed out that of all the five main characters, including the more articulate Dr. Copeland and Jake Blount, «fail to establish satisfying social relationships as Portia Copeland is able to do»¹⁰. Throughout the novel only Portia seems to have the ability to bring people together. It is she who acts as mediator between Dr. Copeland and his sons. It is she who arranges Dr. Copeland's reunion with her mother's family. Even Mick's younger brother, Bubber, seems to feel that Portia is the only person whom he can talk to.

The third of the central characters, Jake Blount, is a confused and confusing character, and his language reflects this confusion. A self-educated social radical, he shifts back and forth between an elevated, artificial diction and a colloquial dialect closer to that of the mill workers he tries to organize. Narrator/Biff describes the mixed nature of Blount's way of talking:

Talk-talk-talk. The words came out of his throat like a cataract. And the thing was that the accent he used was always changing, the kind of words he used. Sometimes he talked like a linthead and sometimes like a professor. He would use words a foot long and then slip up on his grammar. It was hard to tell what kind of folks he had or what part of the country he was from (p. 19).

Blount can use phrases like «dialectical materialism» (p. 64) and «teleological propensity» (p. 64) and brag of self-education. His language, that includes words like «agglutination» alongside others like «younguns» (p. 62), reflects his muddled existence as a man haunted by a sense of injustice that he cannot combat adequately.

⁸ Cleanth Brooks, «Eudora Welty and the Southern Idiom», in *Eudora Welty: A Form of Thanks*, ed. Louis Dollarhide and Ann J. Abadie (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1979) p. 23.

⁹ Crawford Feagin, *Variation and Change in Alabama English; A Sociolinguistic Study of the White Community* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1979), p. 296.

¹⁰ Margaret B. McDowell, *Carson McCullers*, ed. Warren French (Boston: Twayne, 1980), p. 34.

A much more consistent dialect is that of Mick, whose story and perspective dominate the second section of the novel. The non-standard aspects of Mick's dialect reflect not only her surroundings, but also her youth. Mick and narrator/Mick use more non-standard constructions in their language than any other of the character-narrator pairs.

Some of her constructions are used only by Mick, the other children, and the black characters of the novel. Examples are the omission of the copula «be» in «Highboy and Willie here waiting for you» (p. 54) and her use of «less» for «let's», as in «Less talk about the wise men...» (p. 160). Such linguistic parallels suggest the relative lack of education of the children and the blacks, and also emphasize the closeness of the children to black servants such as Portia.

Two characteristics of the dialects of Mick and her narrative voice that emphasize her youth and her habit of inventing words to fit what she wants to say and her occasional mispronunciation or misinterpretation of a word with which adults would be familiar. Mick has people «trompling» on her in a dream (p. 39); Narrator/Mick describes children «scrouged together» (p. 43), «scoots» people with a water hose (p. 234), and listens to Harry «spiel out» ideas (p. 102). Narrator/Mick understands the phrase and discusses a «plaster parish cast». She hears the name of the man whose music she loves before she has learned how to spell it. She thinks of Mozart, but the word is spelled «Motsart» (p. 37) to show her naiveté.

The final character-narrator pair, that of Biff Brannon and narrator/Biff, has the least distinctive dialect of the five pairs. For the most part, Biff and Narrator/Biff use standard English, but without the formality of the Singer dialects (Singer's speech) and without the elevated vocabulary of Dr. Copeland and Jake Blount. The most obvious word used by Biff is the «motherogod» that dots his speech and that of the narrative voice used in his sections. An occasional «don't» for «doesn't» and an omission here and there are the extent of his non-standard usage. He is the one who is best able to observe from a distance and tries to analyze and understand the changes that keep occurring around him.

In her outline of the novel, McCullers says that the primary theme of the book is «man's revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself as fully as possible»¹¹. As Chester E. Eisinger has pointed out, in their relationships with Singer the other characters «have stubbornly embarked upon a monologue in the mistaken notion that they have established the reciprocity necessary for dialogue. They are self deluded in the conversation each holds with himself»¹². In creating dialects for the central characters and the parallel narrative voices, McCullers has emphasized their linguistic differences, symbolic of the character's social estrangement.

Although *The Member of the Wedding* is similar to *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* in its setting, style, and characterization, the effect of McCullers's use of dialect is different from that found in the earlier book. Whereas dialect in *The*

¹¹ Carson McCullers, «Outline of 'The Mute'», *op. cit.*, p. 124.

¹² Chester E. Eisinger, «Carson McCullers and the Failure of Dialogue», in *Fiction of the Forties* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 246.

Heart is a Lonely Hunter helps to delineate individual characters, in *The Member of the Wedding* it serves to define a small group —the kitchen trio of Frankie, Berenice, and John Henry. There is much less non-standard dialect in this novel, and there is less dialogue. What there is, however, does not serve to demarcate the languages of the three central characters so much as to emphasize their closeness —especially that of Frankie and Berenice. They both say «certainly» for «certainly» and «candy» for «candid». They use «don't» for «doesn't», «got» for «have», «lay» for «lie», and «was» for «were» in the subjunctive. Occasionally they use multiple negation, and put an adjective form in an adverb position.

Oliver Evans has pointed out that most of the novel consists of the dialogues between Frankie, John Henry, and Berenice. In describing the language, he says, «It is authentically Southern, giving the book a folk quality, and it is characterized by strategic repetitions which suggest refrains in music»¹³. If *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* is a novel of counterpoint, *The Member of the Wedding* is one of leitmotif. The sense of belonging of the three in the kitchen is relevant in establishing the foreignness of the other worlds Frankie first imagines, then tries to grasp in her futile experiences in town and at the wedding, and then finally settles for in the form of the new Frances.

It is symbolic of Frances' rupture with the kitchen world of Frankie and F. Jasmine that Frances' language lacks the non-standard linguistic structures and expressions she uses in the earlier sections. Her linguistic precision clearly becomes another sign of her superficiality. She has obviously seen language as indication of sophistication, being impressed, for example, when Honey uses the word «fantastic» in speaking with her. Now Frances has adopted a new language along with her new life as Frances Adams, who lives in the suburbs and reads Tennyson.

The same coldness that Portia senses in Dr. Copeland's formal English in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* reappears in Frances' new dialect in the last sections of *The Member of the Wedding*. Language is again reflecting a character's social and emotional situation. In *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, the range of dialects, varying from standard to highly colloquial reemphasizes the essential isolation of the central characters. In *Member of the Wedding* the variations in Frankie's dialect reflect the changes in her character and her movement away from a child's world of communication and commitment toward an adult world that seems to promise only superficial concerns and artificial community.



¹³ Oliver Evans, «Spiritual Isolation in Carson McCullers», in *South: Modern Southern Literature in its Cultural Setting*, eds. Louis D. Rubin Jr. and Robert D. Jacobs (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), p. 333.