Analysis of the Isolation Theme in McCullers’s Work

Jiachen Liu

Xi’an International University, Shaanxi, Xi’an, China.

Abstract

This paper aims to summarize the causes, manifestations, and significance of the "isolation" of the characters in McCullers' works through text analysis and literature review. The goal is to offer insights for further study of McCullers. First, this paper provides a literature review of Carson McCullers' works. The second part introduces McCullers and her works, followed by an introduction to identity theory and existentialism theory, which are relevant to this paper. The main part of the paper discusses the causes, expressions, and significance of the theme of "isolation" in her works. McCullers is one of the most important American writers of the 20th century. Her works are realistic and have unique characteristics. They consistently focus on the lives of marginalized individuals, depicting their helpless living conditions, including loneliness and isolation. This sense of isolation stems from the conflict between the id and the ego within social norms, and it is an inevitable aspect of life. Most of these issues are reflected in distorted relationships, unclear self-awareness, and even deformed characters. The theme of isolation in McCullers' works is not only evident in interpersonal relationships but also in individuals' internal struggles with self-identity. This paper integrates existentialism with the theme of "isolation" in McCullers' works to delve into the significance of isolation in her novels.

Keywords

McCullers, The theme of isolation, Identity cognition, Existentialism

1. An expression of isolation

McCullers once said: “Spiritual isolation is most important part of my creators. My first work is related to this, and almost all subsequent works relate to it in one way or another” (McCullers, 1975). Isolation is a special kind of loneliness. In McCullers' works, there are two main forms of isolation: the first is the "isolation" of Frankie and Mick, that is, in their world, there is a huge gulf between the real self and the imaginary self. Such a person is lonely and isolated. On the one hand, the imaginary self is shouting to the world; on the other hand, reality remains unmoved and unchanged. The true self still cannot escape the confines of this cage, making it difficult to overcome. In addition, another manifestation of isolation is depicted by a second-class soldier in Reflections in a Golden Eye. He struggles to maintain his personality intact as tranquility, harmony, and desire, perceived as opposing yet complementary forces, conflict within him. Ultimately, these conflicting elements converge into a mysterious unity.

In The Members of the Wedding, McCullers uses a unique writing method. In the first part of the novel, she uses "Frankie" to address the heroine, and the second part is the heroine's fictional name for herself, "Fresmin". The third is a more serious and formal name: Frances. The change of name also implies the whole process of the heroine from the tomboy to the fantasy of herself, then experiencing the disillusionment and back to reality, to become a normal ordinary woman Frances.
Frankie evades, even hates, the true self. She was tired of her amazing height, hated the dull summer afternoon of the town, prepared her suitcase for flight at any time, and named herself Fresmin, hoping to attend the wedding of her beautiful brother and sister-in-law. Then follow them to live far away and never come back. Frankie is dirty, careless, and rude, she is a strange girl in a small town who is "confined to the body of a woman and 'confined' to a depressed town" (Qu Zhen, 2008), whereas Fresmin is wearing a gown. There is a soldier willing to date her, she is about to move away from the vulgar town, to a mysterious and beautiful place, and Frances becomes all the ordinary small-town girls, going to school as usual, and having good friends of the same age.

Frankie's body was inhabited by Frankie and Fresmin at the same time, and though she was savage, she longed for the distant place, though rude, but fond of art, the irreconcilable nature of these two personalities made her yearning to flee all the time. The reality, however, was that she had finally failed to follow her brother to the distance, and Frankie's isolation permeated the whole of The Members of the Wedding, despite the fact that she was lively, bold, insightful, and bold, but her body and soul—self in reality and fantasy—as if never to achieve harmony. The world is full of sound and fury, only the long-awaited wedding was like a lighthouse, like the North Star, but difficult to reach. The wedding itself was a symbolic metaphor, a metaphor for Frankie's fantasy of Fresmin.

A second-class soldier named Williams, compared to other soldiers in the barracks, does not smoke, drink, do not cheat, do not gamble, do not associate with other people, he also likes animals and nature, and although the living conditions are poor, he slept comfortably, The character seemed to Incomparably open and transparent, there are two parts in the book that reflect the purity of second—class soldier: he often rides horse into the deep of the jungle, bathes naked in the sun, as if he is the ancestor of mankind who had not civilized, When he saw the captain’s miserable situation in the jungle, he turned a blind eye and kept naked to pull the horse that had wounded the captain and had been beaten by the captain.

But the wife of the captain aroused the desire of the soldier, and when the desire of the soldier was aroused, he seemed to be changed, he often dived into the captain's residence at night, peeped the captain's wife, began to drink, and began to try in contact with others, he sleeps restlessly at night. On the surface, he was still so calm, but the two personalities were tearing at his heart all the time, the man who likes a clear mirror, is also a potential prisoner in his heart. The tear of the double personality in his heart made him frightened. He began to stir up trouble, and the charming lady represented a sin, this sin is so close to beauty, that it elicited a dark desire, like a wonderful poison. McCullers eventually made the soldier die, perhaps she did not express a judgment, she did not attempt to point out the dangers of such a potential personality, but rather to list a different kind of charming thing, which is full of temperature, desire, only one step away from evil, but so tempting, seems to come from the blood of people, and as if it is a mysterious desire which is carry on from generation to generation. McCullers introduced spiritual isolation into the contemplation of deeper life problems, and the isolators were bewitched by a primitive and powerful force, and Williams, who had been educated about the dangers of women, grew up with a mind which contains few desires. McCullers reminded the audience that another potential personality lay in the deepest part of his mind, waiting to be awakened and that the soldiers with two personalities were as lonely as Frankie. At the end of the story, the soldier is shot by the captain as he dives into the captain wife's bedroom, and when he dies, he seems to be detached from his desire to be bewitched by desire, and seems so leisurely, "even in the arms of death, the soldier's body was still comfortable like the warm animals. His serious face did not change, his tanned hand put on the carpet as if he is in dream" (McCullers, 2022).

Although soldiers are tortured by the unprecedented desire for him, but as soon as he died, his desire becomes pure, and he did not hurt others as the upperclassmen and their wives, and his desire, though confusing, was still harmless in the end. Although the two kinds of self still conflict on the surface, they reach a mysterious unity in the deep.

People and themselves are difficult to reach harmony, as mentioned above, mainly manifested in the isolation and self-division, and strangeness brought by isolation. The isolation of people is manifested in the difficulty of communicating their emotions and obtaining a complete "transmission-receiving" process. A lot of people in McCullers’ works are in silence, in a strange but sincere way to give love, but many times, sincere love is in a "wasted" situation, this “difficult to communicate" makes the potential gulf between people seem striking, but despite it is apparent isolation, there is little that can be done with it.

In "The Song of the sad Cafe", Miss Amelia, who is eccentric and fierce, ignores Marvin Marcy, who loves her deeply, and falls in love with cousin Li Meng, who is ugly and is a dwarf. Amelia loved with great care, in love, she was no longer a strong woman, but a gentle young girl, while cousin Li Meng did not respond in return. Instead, he adored Marvin Marcy who looks down on him, and he even helped Marvin Marcy to take revenge on Miss Amelia,
but Li Meng is sold to the circus by Marcy. At the end of the story, Miss Amelia planked all the doors and windows of the house. She came Back to solitude, Miss Amelia gave her feelings in good faith, and the feelings themselves were mysterious, absurd, full of unpredictability, and left to hurt each other deeply. "McCullers used the absurdity of love to prove the inevitability of loneliness. Love should have made people happy, so as to get rid of loneliness, but in her novels, the magnificent love turned into a ridiculous farce. It is the sorrow of the whole human race to be caught in a deeper solitude in order to get rid of loneliness" (Feng Xiuyun, 2011).

As McCullers put it: "Love is a common experience between two people saying it is a common experience does not mean the response in the two individuals concerned was the same. Everyone in love knows that, and he feels in the depths of his soul that his love is a lonely feeling" (Muccullers, 2019). It was because the reaction was difficult to reach a balance that the isolated parties felt deeply powerless. Just like Phyllis, who visited his ex-wife's family in another story, he remained affectionate to his ex-wife throughout the visit. Still full of sorrow about the past, but on the surface. In fact, he pretends he has a happy life at present. In fact, he and his stepson have been difficult to communicate. Feeling the emotional isolation, Phyllis longed to be able to talk, to open his heart, to have all the warm and steady connections in the world. At the end of the story, however, McCulls uses another metaphor: Phyllis, returning from his ex-wife's home, hugged his stepson and said that he must take him to the puppet show, which his stepson has long longed for and was also a sign of the smooth communication between father and son, but the stepson said that the puppet show would never be again. This faint sad ending also seems to show that the lonely and isolated individual craves out of the predicament, but again and again is teased by god in the end. "when people are self-centered and self-deceiving, no communication can exist in the world around him" (Joseph R, 1971).

2. The cause of isolation

This chapter mainly analyzes the constraints of sex, race, and environment that the characters experienced under the social norms. In many of her works, the existence of isolation, on the one hand, because of the conflict between the id and the ego, it is the disharmony between the ego, the personality under the social norms, and the id, the depressed personality, that creates a sense of "isolation", in the other words, produces the difficulties of self-identity cognition and difficulty in communicating with others. On the other hand, in McCullers’ mind, there is no right "solution" for isolation, and the state of isolation is under the control of the mysterious forces, which is inescapable of being human.

"Women are not born, they are made", Beauvoir once said in The Second Sex. In the same way, the theory of gender theory is also concerned with the social and cultural composition of gender. The so-called biological differences between men and women in tradition are closely related to social history and culture. Therefore, gender is actually a kind of "construction".

So, “since culture includes sex, class and race, literary criticism cannot avoid culture and ideology, and those who claim to have avoided ideology are in themselves an ideology” (Wang Xiaolu, 2003) and from McCullers' works, It can be seen on the one hand that her works are influenced by ideology, while at the same time, they also trying to keep distance from ideology, the latter can be seen from her reflections on gender that, in her writings, the characters always tend to grow up with confusion. For example, the collision between two kinds of gender consciousness in the brain: on the one hand, it is the "gender" of society, which is underlying, but must be observed, and on the other hand, it is the unconscious "sex" of self-compliance. For example, social gender norms for men and women, are typically heterosexual. “Those certain gender roles have already precipitated in unconsciousness and internalized into human personality structure, firmly restricting people’s mind and behaviors” (Yu Tingting, 2006). Different gender traits exist in one person: tomboys Mick and Frankie both like to wear boys' clothes, like to pursue excitement, to against injustice, and they deliberately avoid gender identity that belongs to women because they live in an environment in which being a woman means being bound and limited. In Freud's theory, the ego is the personality formed by the repeated lessons of reality, just as the identity of "woman" is defined by society. The instinctive desire of Mick and Frankie led them to break away from their fettered identity. But the two stories give these two similar girls a similar ending, that is, they both end up in compromise, and the external rules can never be completely removed. This ending is related to the significance of describing "isolation", which will be discussed in the post part.

In addition to the constraints of gender, the reason why the true id in the heart of characters of McCullers is bound comes from the environment, not only for they are women, but also for they are themselves in reality.

In The Member of The Wedding, Frankie and Bellyneth and Henry have come together to discuss the world they want to create. They want to be racially devoid, without war, and people can change the seasons and gender at will. Such fantasy is a metaphor for the impact of the bondage of reality on the protagonist. Berenice once said, "We are
all limited. We are born with our own fates. No one knows why, but everyone is defined" (McCullers, 2022). This bondage of the environment is inevitable, it can be said to be the plight of every human being. McCullers set up many unrealizable illusions for her protagonist, such as wanting to be a hero, to know all kinds of people in the world, and to hope that the world would never be separated again. These illusions also contain McCullers' own confusions, in reality, there are always various restrictions and unfreedom, absurdity, and coincidence. In spite of there being many possibilities, people will still be pushed to unpredictable places.

In McCullers' stories, the mysterious force that drives isolation often leads people into a helpless predicament. In the tragedy of the fate of ancient Greece, the protagonists are often trapped in an inextricable predicament, which the ancient Greeks attributed to the mysterious power of fate. Just as innocent Orriestus was embroiled in revenge disputes because of the grudges of the previous generation, in McCullers' writings, innocent figures also stepped inexplicably into various circumstances: the inescapable constraint of environment was accompanied by the birth of everyone; Emotion’s communication and frustration; the gap between people’s personality causes the communication powerless. McCullers painted the absurd world controlled by mysterious forces, the people in this world isolated from each other in misunderstanding, miss, and indifference.

3. The significance of describing "isolation"

McCullers describes the absurdity of life, but although McCullers describes all kinds of isolation, that is, whether it is the plight of human self-cognition or the isolation between people and others. In her works, isolation comes from resistance to the absurd: identity cognition barrier comes from a desire for another self, a passion for an ideal life. The despair and futility of love are also proof of the efforts of love.

The perception of "isolation" itself is a rejection of the absurd and the search for real Belonging, in the description of "isolation", hidden the detection and rejection of the absurdity of existence, McCullers molded many people who say "no" to their own life, and these said "no" people. In action, it is the man who says yes. With their action of "yes", they interpret the meaning of existence, that is, to face the absurd existence. It is embodied in the choice of self-made existence, the rejection of suicide, and living in reality.

God is dead, and man is thrown into the world, the numb and inhuman life day after day, the person who becomes the atom makes it difficult to understand themselves and others clearly, the people who are in the specific history and experience the finiteness of circumstances and so on makes people realize absurdity, feel tired and think of struggle, people feel that "they are outsiders, this exile is irreparable because the long for hometown and the expectation for paradise has been deprived" (Camus, 2021). Absurdity is the broken and conflicitive relationship between man and the world, which is reflected in three aspects: the rupture of man and the world, the rupture of the relationship between man and man; The break between man and himself. With the development of society, God and the transcendental world represented by him were questioned, reason appeared pale, the whole world became mysterious, irrational and difficult to explain, so the clear order that people longed for is also difficult to establish. "Absurdity arises from the confrontation between man's call and the irrational silence of the world" (Camus, 2021), that is to say, in the relationship between man and the world, at the same time the final outcome of death mocks the struggle of man and makes it difficult to find the ultimate significance which can comfort people.

McCullers' characters live in such a mysterious and chaotic reality. Frankie tries to tell her fortune but finally finds out that the mysterious big mother doesn't really have a special ability. In the end, she had to listen to her inner voice to make her life choices. The characters she wrote gave up physical suicide and also gave up what Camus called philosophical suicide, in other words, the sheltering of religion, they seek its own existence significance solitarily, yearning for a new self, yearning for sincere pure feelings, although in the way of seeking encountered all kinds of inevitable ultimate problems: the division of self, the isolation from others. The absurd world draws all sorts of boundaries for them, but those who devote themselves to splitting and isolating still expose and accuse the absurdity with their experience of division and isolation. "This state of absurdity, it is important to live in it" (Camus, 2021), there is no future and no God, people live in the world, and we have to bear everything, face the reality, based on the present, "absurd man… He was in the time of his life… Keeping taking risks… ruling out all judgment… living outside God, they are nailed to time, trapped in exile, but also good at living on the scale of life that has no future and is without doting." In Sartre's opinion, self-made existence is "existence precedes essence, and is the ability to give meaning to existence before its essence" (Min Yuan, 2016), the essence of existence is determined by exercising subjective initiative. The essence of existence is not the answer that is waiting ahead, not by the transcendental force in advance, but is formed step by step in the process of existence. Existence lies in a free choice, which involves
responsibility at the same time. In McCullers' work, Frankie tries to gain free from the constraints of the environment. She is unwilling to be the "defined" girl, unwilling to obey the rules. She is always preparing to escape. Within her, there seemed to be another person who was out of step with society’s expectations. And Miss Amelia, until the end, even if she was not have a stiver, she still insisted to her sincereness. They are no doubt freaks because they are far from the comfort zone of social norms and wish to live their lives with their truest attitude.

At the end given by McCullers, it is the characters themselves who bear their own lives, losing and seeking again and again, not a universal answer, but more about the attitude and perception of "this being", while people lose precious things again and again. People are lonely and even distort themselves. But in any case, in the process, they have come back, perhaps they have since returned to and preserved the true existence, the self-made existence, and reached the peace of the soul, struggling to and questioning the absurd and comfortable existence state. Life itself may be like a plague, but many people choose to stay, to stay in reality, to give up religious asylum, and to create the value of survival in the face of inevitable death, as Dr. Leah did.

McCullers' description of people's isolation not only urges the reader to think about the metaphysical aspects of existence from the existentialist point of view but also urges the reader to face up to the problem of race and gender identity in reality.

Lacan's theory of subject construction holds that the subject is acquired, and he believes that the subject is formed. After children enter the mirror stage, that is, young children can distinguish between their own and their mother, realizing their own independent existence, “the other” then will be produced. "Children get the original sense of self from the other's image.” After learning the language, the children entered the symbolic stage and received the power represented by the father. The language itself represents a social order, after entering the symbolic world, children have desire. Desire is no longer "I want", in the beginning, desire is the desire of others. In essence, my desire is always the desire of other people. So the narcissism of man is mistaken for the other, and the object of desire is no longer the direct object I want, nor is it related to me, but something mediated by the other. People often think that they love themselves, but they love others’ (Zhang Yibing, 2005).

From this, we can see that the so-called subject in the theory of subject construction is the subject shaped by social order and norms. The desire for self and even the whole self are constructed and continue to be influenced by others. Feminism and postcolonialism are closely related to the theory of subject construction, that is, the existence of "female", which is the definition added by society to the individual, implies discourse manipulation, in a same way, the image of the colonized person is also defined by the colonizer. “The colonized person is generally regarded as backward and ignorant, and in this way, the colonizer can gain dependable reasons for their behavior of colonization. Black people have been living in oppressed injustice” (Laurie, 1991).

Many of the characters in McCullers' novels find it difficult to reconcile themselves and others in the bondage of identity and this situation creates isolation, and she has been trying to describe how individuals break away from the bondage of identity. From Marcuse pointed out in his interpretation of ideology, literary works are influenced by ideology, and at the same time point to it, and McCullers' works are aware of this bondage of ideology, and are alluding to the bondage of identity, Frankie spent the summer to fancy a new, unfettered self, while Bellynethad a rough appearance, but she has a warm heart, although she is black people who is looked down by white people, but she is virtuous, More respectable than the pretentious white people in the book, this description no doubt breaks the traditional Western centrism definition of colored people.

McCullers' description of this kind of bondage urges readers to see that all kinds of so-called identities are imposed by social norms on individuals, and her works consider and break through all kinds of "identities" added by society to individuals, and she sees that people are eager to break through gender norms and sees the identities of different ethnic groups imposed by ideologies. She deeply pondered and explored the concept of identity, which is the unique significance of her novels.

4. Conclusion

Through her depiction of isolation, McCullers expressed some hopelessness about the world. Since born as a human being, everyone was inevitably bound by society, and there seemed to be a mysterious force behind it. All this makes life seem to be full of coincidences and absurdities, and it is difficult for people to reach true harmony with others, or even to interact with themselves peacefully. But her description of people under isolation seeking to break free is like the wings of flight in pain, hopeless but full of power. People are like Sisyphus who pushes the rock up the mountain. Although the world is absurd, the harmony between man and himself or between man and others is difficult.
to achieve, but the characters of McCullers have made their own life choices, and to assume one's responsibilities—to be difficult to get along with yourself, is to seek another self who has broken free from the bondage and has unlimited possibilities, and at the same time, the bondage reminds readers of the biases contained by race, gender, and so on; difficult to communicate with others, but still unremitting dedication.

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