



Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi
Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi
Van Yüzüncü Yıl University
The Journal of Social Sciences Institute
Yıl / Year: 2020 - Sayı / Issue: 48
Sayfa/Page: 75-86
ISSN: 1302-6879



Carson McCullers' ın Yalnız Bir Avcıdır Yürek Eserindeki Sessiz Etkileşim *Silent Interaction in The Heart is A Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers*

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Makale Bilgisi | Article Information

Makale Türü / Article Type:

Araştırma Makalesi/ Research Article

Geliş Tarihi / Date Received:

11/09/2019

Kabul Tarihi / Date Accepted:

31/05/2020

Yayın Tarihi / Date Published:

30/06/2020

Atf: Takva, S. & Aras, G. (2020). Carson McCullers' ın Yalnız Bir Avcıdır Yürek Eserindeki Sessiz Etkileşim. *Van Yüzüncü Yıl Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi*, 48, 75-86

Citation: Takva, S. & Aras, G. (2020). Silent Interaction in The Heart is A Lonely Hunter by Carson McCullers. *Van Yüzüncü Yıl University the Journal of Social Sciences Institute*, 48, 75-86

Öz

İnsanoğluna ait temel özelliklerden biri olan iletişim, insanların birbirlerini anlamaları açısından en önemli araç olmuştur. Sadece mesaj ve alıcı şeklinde basit bir şekilde tanımlanmasına rağmen, mesajların farklı ve öngörülemez değişkenler tarafından etkilenebildiği karmaşık bir süreçtir. İletişim sadece inanç ve ideolojilerimizi kapsayan bir fenomen değil aynı zamanda kültürel yapımızı ve bunun yerleşimimiz üzerine etkilerini içermektedir. Belli bir toplumun tüm üyeleri birbirlerini anlamak için iletişimi kullanmakta ve yazılı-görsel enstrümanlar aracılığıyla sürekli ve sağlıklı bir fikir alışverişini amaç edinmektedirler. İletişimin ruhuna aykırı olarak, bireyler iletişim becerilerine sahip olsalar bile iletişim bazen sekteye uğrayabilir. Bu bağlamda, toplumun yansıtıcı figürleri olan yazarlar, iletişimsizliği yetersizlikleriyle birlikte sunmaya çalışırlar. Carson McCullers, John Singer adını verdiği sessiz karakterini romanının merkezine alarak *Yalnız bir Avcıdır Yürek (The Heart is a Lonely Hunter)* adlı romanında iletişimsel yetersizlikleri ele almaktadır. Bu makalenin amacı *Kalp Yalnız bir Avcıdır* adlı eserde, Carson McCullers'ın insanoğlunun problemlerinden biri olan iletişim yetersizliğini başarılı bir dille nasıl ele aldığını sunmaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Carson McCullers, *Yalnız bir Avcıdır Yürek*, Sessiz, Etkileşim, Yetersizlik.

Abstract

Communication as one of the basic features belonging to humankind has always been the most significant tool to understand each other. Although it is described as an activity involving a message and receiver, it is a complicated process in which the messages can be affected by various and unpredictable variables. Communication itself is a phenomenon covering not only our beliefs and ideologies but also our cultural background(s) and their effects on our settlement. All members of a specific community employ communication so as to understand each other and they aim to gain a constant and healthy exchange of ideas that can be established through written and oral tools. Contrary to the essence of communication, sometimes communication may be hindered though the individuals may have the potential to communicate. In this respect, authors as the reflective figures of society, highlight the structure of miscommunication along with its drawbacks. They tend to provide their readers with the current situation involving how we suffer because of inadequate communication. Carson McCullers highlights deficiencies of communication in her novel titled *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* by placing her muted character in the center of her novel. The purpose of this article is to present how in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* she successfully presents miscommunication.

Keywords: Carson McCullers, *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, Silent, Interaction, Deficiency.

Introduction

When Carson McCullers wrote her debut novel in 1939, the country was suffering from many problems. Born in South America, she had to face most of the problems occurring in the South. She could not turn a blind eye to the drawbacks and calamities taking place all around her. Therefore, to her, handling these issues in her writing was ultimately the best way to express herself more openly.

Out of many disastrous outcomes of the clash between the North and the South, perhaps the loss of the communication and empathy in the society was the most poignant one for the author. As McCullers writes in an essay, "Communication is the only access to love-, to conscience, to nature, to God, and to the dream" (Presley: 2011: 26). But, for all the peace and hope the characters of her first novel experience, each might as well be a mute.

To begin with the historical background of the novel; there was a great economic depression then. Both by the stock market crash of October 29, 1929, and by the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the 1930s saw the gravest economic depression the United States

has ever faced. Although urban unemployment soared to a peak of 15 million in 1932, the worst afflicted in the country were the farmers. In 1932 farm incomes fell to less than half of the 1929 level. The result was that many farmers could no longer meet mortgage payments, and their farms were foreclosed and auctioned off. Between 1927 and 1932 the number of forced sales of Southern farms rose from 21 to 46 per thousand.

Despite the attempts of the American Cotton Cooperative Association to limit crop production, cotton prices continued to plummet, and textile mills poured out a surfeit of unwanted cloth into the market. Between 1928 and 1932, the manufacturers' price fell below the margin needed to cover costs, and the mills suffered absolute losses. Although McCullers describes the cotton mills in her novel as "big and flourishing" (McCullers, 2010: 3) the men who work there nevertheless are very poor embodying the desperate characteristic of the time period. "Often in the faces along the streets there was the desperate look of hunger and loneliness" (McCullers, 2010: 4). So the time the novel takes place was a very sad and hopeless phase for the country, especially for the South.

At the centre of her novel she places a deaf-mute person. Symbolically, we are handed the hint of the communication that seems to exist, but, indeed, never taking place in the novel. Let alone the mute one, even the articulate characters in the novel cannot communicate with each other in any way. Such a hindrance as Tanrıtanır states ; contrary to ancient times "this is a disaster and man-made leading to disconnection" (2018: 4061).

Employing an irony, McCullers creates a deaf-mute character. Though not able to speak or hear, John Singer proves to be the moderator of all the five major characters in the novel. All the characters, apart from Singer, have difficulty in communicating one another. With some basic reasons behind it, this very bitter situation of the society, in general, worries McCullers a lot. It is believed that from the microcosm of the South America, she steps into the macrocosm of all the people in the world in that no single man is able to get to the other neither psychologically nor empathically. Thus, McCullers presents a detailed and at the same time a puzzle-like human condition to us.

Silent Interaction in *The Heart is A Lonely Hunter*

The novel opens with two deaf-mute friends. John Singer and his friend Spiros Antonapoulos. It has been ten years then they have been living together. The other characters show up only after Antonapoulos is sent to the mental asylum by his cousin which was

against Singer's will. Being too much fond of Antonapoulos, Singer worries a lot for his friend. And finally he moves into a boarding house so as to fill the void left with the absence of his best friend. Then the introduction of all the other characters take place one by one as they encounter Singer. It is astonishing for the readers to find Singer as the central figure of all these people for communicating as he is a mute person. Soon after he moves to the boarding house, The Kellies, he starts to be a close and genuinely considerate person for everyone he meets.

As Kohler puts forward: John Singer, "the mute who stands at the center of action and meaning in *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, is such a figure, realistically drawn" (1951: 415). Details of his physical appearance, habits, occupation, environment, personal relationships, and the difficulties of his physical handicap are all faithfully presented to show the complicated nature of his social experience. Isolation as the devastating element hindering the communication segregates the members of the society and it may also be defined as the process of people losing their contacts with other social resources or their willingness to participate. Among these, the inability of the people to get in touch with each other is much more important. They literally share nothing though they have much in common. For instance, the major four characters are: Jake Blount, a propagandist mill worker, who finds Karl Marx and his doctrines as the only solutions to all the problems of the world; Dr. Copeland, a scholarly black physician who has devoted all his life and efforts to solve the social and racial ills of his people; Mick Kelly, a thirteen-year-old girl with a deep love of music and feeling alienated from his family; Biff Brannon, the proprietor of the New York Cafe, who attempts to control his life by himself, rejecting all the outer interferences. All these people in this or that way are in touch with Singer. In time they start to find Singer as an indispensable person in their lives. Insistently, McCullers reminds us that understanding is much more important than words.

Singer shows up like a hero of the four people as they find such great sincerity in him. Mick is the most transforming character in the novel as she constantly tries to accomplish her dreams. However, she ends up working at a small shop which was against all her ambitions. Seeing the autobiographical similarity between Mick and McCullers, Presley phrases that "Mick Kelly's destiny as a clerk in Woolworth's is the author's projection of her future in the South, had she not escaped" (2011: 26). The autobiographical background of the author clearly has some touches upon Mick Kelly. Like Mick, McCullers was a Southern girl and had a deep interest in music. Like

Mick, McCullers tried her best to reach her aims and dreams, however, Mick ends up with failure in her dream of becoming a musician. McCullers, too, had to give up her dream of becoming a concert pianist. Thus, reading Mick can subtly gives us the true self of the author herself.

Singer can be seen as the spike bound to four people around him so that no kind of movement is ever possible for him. Much of the power Singer possesses is entrusted to him by his fellows, who create characteristics in him to fill the void in themselves. Through the course of time, we watch Singer turning into the hero of their unilluminated life and choked selves. Ironically enough McCullers gives a mute person as the only solution for their communication. For instance, Jake Blount encounters John Singer at the New York Cafe. He sits at his table and talks about the workers' problems quite a long time and Jake can only understand that he is mute after the following day. The only reason for this ignorance of Jake is just the hunger for sharing and communicating with a person with whom he can feel relaxed and relieved. In this case, we can almost easily witness a type of selfishness: Jake is so much taken away by his issues that he does not care about Singer or his situation. Jake feels that Singer is the only one who can understand him. "You're the only one in town who catches what I mean," (McCullers, 2010: 19) says Jake and continues "For two days now I been talking to you in my mind because I know you understand the things I want to mean" (McCullers, 2010: 19). Accordingly, "Singer, of course, may or may not understand any unarticulated message. But he has been endowed with the power to see, to understand, to heal. In spite of the human desire to create a heroic figure, one who can save and unscramble the puzzle of existence, the results are often only temporarily positive. "By molding someone to reach out to them, people may learn to feel as they have not felt before" (Whitt,1992: 32).

One of the concepts she Carson McCullers fictionally is that in a disorganized society individual Gods or principles are likely to be chimerical and fantastic. Because Mick, Copeland and Blount create Singer to meet their needs, their god is not a divine God. He is a human being just like them. And for this reason, as in modern life, McCullers' fictional universe includes too much need for many listeners. Similarly, the others find Singer close to themselves, too. For example, Dr Copeland is a dedicated person and he, too, finds serenity and peace in Singer. Mick, the teenager, has some dreams about music for her future, but she only shares them with Singer; she does not even tell about them to her family members. Even when she decides to leave school and

work for her family, she asks for Singer's opinion. And only after singer consents that she should work does she make her mind to take the job. As clearly seen, Singer is like stepping into all the burdens of the characters just to relieve and alleviate their individual boredom.

Biff Brannon is also another character who feels peaceful just being in the orbit of Singer. He gets close to him as Singer always eats his meal at his cafe. Throughout the novel, McCullers is like having her characters make peace with themselves with the help of Singer. In Young's words, "the other characters have made of Singer a kind of homemade God, to replace the God who has disappeared from the world in which they live" (1977: 162). Therefore, we can deduce that Singer walks slowly into the neighbourhood of these figures's presence silently, and then somehow turns out to be the only shoulder of support for every single of them at the same time. It may be stated suggest that Singer stands for Jesus Christ. With reference to the biblical sources, Jesus is given as the shepherd of people; like a shepherd of the sheep, Jesus is to lure them away from the dangers and the disasters to the right path. And just like Jesus, Singer does lead the people around him to a better condition of the world. Either chosen by McCullers deliberately or not, the name Singer must have a lot to do with this commentary of the critics.

Perhaps it would be better if we take McCullers's view of God into consideration while reading the book. Virginia Spencer Carr, McCullers biographer, writes in *The Lonely Hunter*: "Above all, Carson felt that praying was indispensable to regain her own redemption. McCullers, Spencer says, (1975:194) "recognized God as an omniscient being, a supreme creator who imposed order on the universe, but she sometimes saw him as a capricious deity whose specialty was freaks" (1975: 186). This type of acceptance and questioning God leaves McCullers in suspicion and hinders her, just it does her characters in the novel, separated and alienated from the society itself. The individuals despite their articulative skills are fragmented and lonely which results in emotional isolation. The emotional isolation creates lack of communication and finally causes desperate identities who have no connections with the outer world. Thus, the great alienation starts from the innerself and moves on to the outer World and there begins social isolation described by Umberson and Montez as "the state of being deprived of social relationships that provide positive feedback and are meaningful to the individual" (2010:51). While an author is not always her own best critic, McCullers's words are easily supported, reflecting the author. Lonely and trying to alleviate her pain through music, Mick comes closer than other characters to recognizing her deification of

Singer and to echoing McCullers's own spiritual search. "Everybody in the past few years knew there wasn't any real God. When she thought of what she used to imagine was God she could only see Mister Singer with a long, white sheet around him. God was silent" (McCullers, 2010: 102).

Insistently, McCullers reminds us that understanding functions better than words and the effort of a deaf-mute to show how to communicate is considered a horror.

There are quite many suggestions about what Singer can stand for, ranging from a moderator to an ordinary man, from Jesus Christ to God, from a real hero of the characters he meets to an amiable neighbour. It depends how we look at him and from what perspective. For instance, the parallels between Singer and Christ in McCullers's allegory begin to be obvious: Singer "listened, and in his face there was something gentle..." (McCullers, 2010: 114). The description of Singer visiting a hospital ward with Dr. Copeland easily reminds one of Christ walking among the crowds of the sick and dying in Palestine (Whitt, 1992:29). So, as a featuring character, Singer can come to be many at the same time. A different perspective comes from Presley who believes to, "Singer does not understand a single word they say. Singer is like a dead god; those who trust in him, who believe in the redemptive potential of communication, deceive themselves" (2011: 10). Although the futility of human communication in this worst of all possible worlds must be noted, Singer cannot be considered ignorant of the messages which directed his way. We are told early in the novel that he is a proficient lip reader. Neither is he a dead god. It is his compassion--his interest in his fellows--which radiates from him. For example, when Singer is accosted by strangers on the street, he refuses to ignore them, although the reader soon learns that Singer is unable to save them from their respective demons. "By midsummer," McCullers writes, "Singer had visitors more often than any other person in the house" (McCullers, 2010: 78). So Singer is like the only connection point of the people in the novel.

Accepting all these suggestions, Singer is more like an overestimated figure with ordinary traits. Obviously, Singer is a normal character; however the problem is with the other four lonely characters. Otherwise, Singer would seem to be an ordinary person. The problem of getting into dialogues turns out to be a recurrent concept in McCullers. It is never resolved or comes to an end. As the South was then suffering from poverty and corruption, people were on the verge of their patience and tolerance. For instance, Jake is so alert and ready for arguments that he is always quarrelsome. There seems to be no kind

of endurance among these people. McCullers must have observed such scenes when she lived in the area. Therefore, for such worn-out members of the society, the greatest thing ever would be to be listened to by someone without being interrupted or questioned in any way; and that is why McCullers offers Singer as a relief to these people. McCullers puts great emphasis on the inability of all the men in the world. In a way, all the characters are heavily crippled regarding their failure in achieving even a small dialogue with each other. As we see, Singer is mute and he has to use sign language to communicate. Otherwise, maybe, he would be just like the others. If he were an articulate person, perhaps, he would be just one of the ill-communicating people we have in the novel.

When McCullers first wrote the book, he first called it *The Mute*. 'Mrs. McCullers's original title, *The Mute*, might have been intended as a plural form' (Millichap, 1971:16). It is not hard to infer that McCullers was quite aware of the fact that *The Mute* would refer to all the articulate characters, apart from Singer. The writer had to change the name into *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* for the sake of attracting more attention as there was a hit song then with the same name.

The society realistically drawn by McCullers is full of people with such features and mishaps. The closer they get physically, the larger the distance among them grows. Thus, the society turns out to be like the population formed by a lot of mute people, now that they cannot communicate with each other. The words and even speech do come to nothing in this sense. So, Singer proves to be the only sound and speech for all of them. Though he is mute, from his title is promised the hope to speak and to relieve with the melody and the tranquility of his voiceless voice. Everyone finds in Singer the peace they long for in their lives.

As mentioned before, Singer becomes the common friend of everyone. But at the end of the book, he commits suicide when he learns that his friend is dead and this takes us to another stage of the dissatisfaction in his communication with people around him. It leaves us speechless when we observe all the characters, who have been with Singer every now and then, not having even a single idea about what is happening in Singer's world and the reason behind his suicide. They are even uninformed about his friend Antonopoulus and his case. McCullers writes of Singer, "Mick Kelly and Jake Blount and Doctor Copeland would come and talk in the silent room--for they felt that the mute would always understand whatever they wanted to say to him. And maybe even more than that" (McCullers, 2010: 81).

Quite interestingly, neither Singer has wanted to mention them his friends nor they show any clue of interest in learning more of Singer's inner self. Through a sporadic omniscient point of view, McCullers tells the reader: "Each man described the mute as he wished him to be" (McCullers, 2010: 190). By making Singer divine, the townspeople "depersonalize and, in effect, murder him" (Whitt, 1992: 28). They do not take him as an individual person. And McCullers, creates the greatest irony in that though they seem to exchange words with each other, they, indeed, have no common sense of sharing. Similarly, Vickery draws our attention to the uncommunicativeness of the characters uttering that; "each of the characters is passionately desirous of communicating with other human beings, of being understood and accepted. ... While he watches, the child, the radical, the reformer, the freak, and the wise man embark upon a quest for understanding which leads them to John Singer and his room" (1960: 14-13). There, they apparently find the love and understanding they were seeking, unaware that what they see imaged in the deaf-mute is their own alter-ego, their own perfected and fulfilled self. Before he asserts his own identity through his death, he is rumored to be a Jew by the Jews, a rich man by the merchants, and an organizer for the C.I.O. by at least one browbeaten textile union. (1960:16) So on the surface, all the people are pretty eager to accept Singer as one of them. However, this comes to mean nothing as they have no idea about what Singer thinks of them or what he has in his mind as an individual. As some suggest, Singer is never taken as an individual; instead he is like a figure who can understand everyone. But in one of Singer's letters to Antonopoulos he mentions that there are some townspeople around him, but he can barely understand them or their behaviours. So, indeed, Singer is not a solution for them as they take him to be. Unfortunately Singer is all alone as neither these people around him nor his mute friend do understand him. It is too bad that his song is never sung. And again we witness the failure in communication among the characters. If we have a closer look at the characters one by one, we will have a good chance to analyze their situation more easily: Mick is a teenager, she cares for her two brothers. She is fond of music and takes long walks at night to hear some music from the windows open. Though she has very intense ambition for becoming a musician, she barely speaks about it to her family. She does not share such dreams of her own with anyone but Singer.

As a second example, Dr Copeland is a person who has been rejected by his family due to his dedication to his job and the improvement of his people. He believes in the ultimate change in the

black nation. His family is not so optimistic and his son was arrested due to a misunderstanding. When Dr Copeland goes to prison, a racist judge accuses him of being drunk, so suddenly he is put into jail, too. The unfuturistic situation of the black nation is well-seen with the bitter example of the amputation of Dr Copeland's son's gangrenous feet in the prison. This is really important in that McCullers may not seem optimistic about the betterment of the black issue.

Jake is a very energetic and arrogant person. He quarrels more than he speaks. Both Jake and Dr Copeland are indeed defenders of the same ideology. Nevertheless, due to his arrogance and great wrath, Jake ends up with a harsh quarrel even with Dr Copeland, with whom they share the same ideas. Thus, we again observe the failure of dialogues. Biff Brannon, the owner of the cafe, is a very observant person. He runs the cafe and at the same time always watches the people. He, too, does not have any clue about sharing any idea or thought with anyone. Before his wife is dead, they hardly ever talk to each other. It is like they try to escape from each other like day and night; when Biff is working at the cafe his wife Alice is sleeping, and when she cares for the cafe, Biff is somewhere else. It seems to me that they deliberately do not come together so as not to converse. The relationships among all these characters are really weird as seen in these examples. And finally, Singer, the mute-protagonist of the novel, has difficulty in getting to his best friend Antonopoulos and receiving a warm friendship in return. Antonopoulos is nothing like Singer. He is not passionate or crazy about Singer, he is obese and tends to commit some crimes in the society like stealing, robbing, so on. He is lazy, gluttonous, fat and rude. When he is put into the asylum, Singer regularly visits him with baskets of foods and other stuff. The relationship between them is like a mystery as they have quite opposite personalities.

As some of the critics believe Singer may have a homosexual tendency towards Antonopoulous. And this can be the only reasonable explanation for Singer's blindfolded fondness of Antonopoulous. He is not interested in Singer in any way, he does not think of him or even try to return his love. It is like an unrequited love in the case of Singer. And a strong support for this claim is, without doubt, his suicide upon learning about Antonopoulous's death at the asylum. This shows all the suspicions related to their straight relationship. Even Singer, the protagonist, proves to be a failure in terms of communicating with his best and close friend.

As we have studied in detail, all the characters are having a really hard time in conversing with each other despite their total awareness of the very bitter situation. For example, one day they all

come to visit Singer. However, due to the presence of the others, neither of them could feel comfortable enough and after uttering only a few sentences about the weather they leave Singer's room one by one. To his astonishment, Singer cannot understand the reason why they have not talked this time as they have always had when they were alone with Singer. If we have a look at the plot structure of the novel, it resembles a musical composition with many instruments and types of sounds. The book is divided into 3 parts; 6 chapters in the first, 15 chapters in the second, and 4 in the last part of the novel. Part One introduces the broad theme of "man's revolt against his own inner isolation and his urge to express himself" as one voice, first through John Singer and then through the other major characters. Part Two demonstrates the inevitable failure of each person, which is brought on by a combination of free will and environmental entrapment. Part Three functions as a coda; the situations of the characters ultimately end worse than their previous lives without Singer. Furthermore, each section is envisioned from a different character's perspective. And it goes without doubt that she creates a masterpiece by making use of such an outstanding method. With this first book of herself, McCullers became an overnight literary sensation.

Despite her young age, McCullers was fairly aware of the drawbacks in the society among the people. So she portrays a great silhouette of the South with its one of the incurable crippling, that is, its communicative problem. As human beings, they are supposed to share and converse with one another. Carson McCullers shows us what disaster and discrepancy can happen in such a great void of communication. In the novel it is really sad that none of the characters are aware of their bitter situation, and how deeply they are in need of real communication and conversation.

Conclusion

In this paper, the aim is to try to go deep into the clashes and chasms created in the characters and their lives. Displaying their inabilities in their efforts to lead a humane life turns out to be a rather difficult and unreachable point. McCullers does not show much hope in regard to the uncommunicativeness of the people. Though she presents Singer as a cure for communication at first, through the course of time, it turns out that he fails in being a cure or solution for the people around him, and even for himself. So the author shows a tragic end with the suicide of Singer. No kind of betterment or improvement can ever be possible in the characters' conditions. McCullers successfully draws a perfect picture of such a terrible problem in a very artistic way despite

her very young age in a community where uncommunicative activities affect not only the individuals but also the society as a whole.

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